

**ADDRESSING BIBLICAL ILLITERACY:
A RESPONSE TO A GROWING CONCERN IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

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**BY
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**Dedicated with love,
to my mother, Marilyn Kay Ast**

and

**My father, William (Bill) Ast,
who passed away on July 31, 2011.**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project arises out of a growing concern in the biblical illiteracy of adults and the lack of awareness of God's presence in their daily lives. Addressing what is now called the crisis in the Christian church, I attempt to propose that the church needs to teach systematic theology, exegesis and spiritual formation to their congregations so that the Bible will become relevant and alive for the modern reader and will as a result transform lives. A *24 Hours with God* retreat format is suggested as one response to enticing people away from their busy lives to enter into the text through a concentrated learning experience. Using several retreat formats over a period of years, a survey was taken to evaluate the best format and its effectiveness. A copy of the survey and its results are enclosed.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM, SETTING, AND RESPONSE

The Problem

This thesis-project arises from many years of ministry where I have had a growing concern about the biblical illiteracy of adults and the lack of awareness of God's presence in their daily lives. I am passionate about investing in the spiritual lives of men and women so that they are changed by the power of the Gospel message and become living testimonies for our Lord in the world. Yet Scripture makes it clear that before anyone can become a true living testimony for Christ, they must claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and come to know him through the study of God's Word.

As a Bible teacher and theologian, I lean upon the method of studying God's Word line-by-line. In my young adult years, my life was transformed into a deeper and more personal relationship with Jesus Christ through this process. With this experience, I have come to believe that helping others to come to know Christ through studying the Bible is my calling and purpose for the kingdom of God, for this is a great need in society. Through prayer, community, and the study of Scriptures, God can be made known and lives can change. My desire is to provide a way of studying the Bible that will be enticing and experiential as new alternatives for concentrated study and renewal are introduced.

In addition to studying the Bible line-by-line, I want to help men and women to come to understand that daily devotions such as “Living with the Word”¹ will also reshape their lives. My goal is to provide spiritual formation principles and techniques for careful exegesis so that people can come to see for themselves the relevancy of God’s truth for their lives. Strategies for analyzing the text through line-by-line study along with journaling will encourage sensitivity to the presence of the Holy Spirit and lead to a more accurate understanding of the text, personal discovery and a take home truth that can be applied for authentic living.

The Setting

The problem that has been growing in the church is magnified by the setting. Men and women may consider going to church a good idea and may want to come to know God, and yet they don’t make this good idea a high enough priority in the midst of all that competes for their time. Unique to my church situation is that I would estimate that half of my congregation has two to three homes in various parts of the country. Further, many of those who do not own property elsewhere travel often, even though Fort Lauderdale is located in the beautiful tropics of South Florida.

Fort Lauderdale is on the Atlantic Coast and according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population is approximately 184,000. The city is a popular tourist destination, with over ten million visitors a year. Fort Lauderdale is sometimes known as the “Venice of America” because of its expansive and intricate canal system. The city is a major yachting center, with 42,000 resident yachts and 100 marinas and boatyards. There are at

¹ Connie Ast Caldwell and Rosalind Davis, *Living with the Word: Devotions for Daily Living* (First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, 2008).

least 165 miles of navigable waterways within the city itself and also seven miles of a luxurious beach. The city sits twenty-three miles north of Miami, Florida. Fort Lauderdale and the surrounding area host over 4100 restaurants and 120 nightclubs. Best of all, the average monthly temperature in Fort Lauderdale's tropical climate is usually above sixty-five degrees. The city also has opera, arts and various classical entertainment venues along with sporting events.

These attractions of our cultural setting play a large role in the problem, which is now referred to by Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry as the *American Church Crisis*. An article from *Outreach* magazine for worship leaders brings forth the concern, expressed by Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry that the American Church is in a crisis: "Sundays are quiet in today's America. Banks and businesses are closed. Rush hour traffic takes a rest. Most Americans have the day off. But the reason for the "holiday" is no longer about anything HOLY, for a growing number of people don't attend weekend worship services." They report that mainline churches are steadily declining with the "Organic Church" on the rise. People are using small groups of twenty or fewer people in their living rooms as sanctuaries and online communities as fellowship. It seems that people who don't go to church still seem to identify with their faith traditions and roots, but people have become increasingly disconnected with family and friends in their communities and find that they do many activities alone.²

However, George Barna's research firm, in a study of the religious beliefs and behavior of Americans and the intersection of faith and culture, points out that there is still some good news and that is: people are still seeking God. Yet Christians are

² Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, "The American Church in Crisis," *Outreach Magazine*, (May/June 2006), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/outreach/articles/americanchurchcrises.html> (accessed April 27, 2012).

experiencing and expressing their faith apart from the institutional church, and this has created a problem. Barna comments, “We are living in a time where spirituality and faith are hot, but it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re deep and I can’t help but wonder if anyone is becoming transformed.”³

Other prominent researchers along with missiologists and church leaders provide their views on the topic. Though much of the information for the decline of the American church has been available for years and has not changed, it is necessary that we pay attention to our changing culture and community. Research shows that people are being driven to live different kinds of lives, and so they are looking for different kinds of experiences. Some facts lined out are that only 17–20 percent of Americans regularly attend church.⁴ *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* by sociologists C. Kirk Hadaway and Penny Long Mailer, known for scholarly research on the church, bring out that church attendance has not grown; in fact it is on an alarming decline.

Ed Stetzer, Missiologist and Director of the Center for Missional Research reports that spiritual behavior is occurring outside the church walls. In his recent study on alternative faith communities, he found that a growing number of people are finding Christian discipleship in the community, but not in the local church. Approximately six million people are reported to meet weekly with a small group yet rarely walk inside a church building. “There is a significant movement happening.”⁵

³ George Barna, “Studies the Research, Offers a Year-in-Review Perspective,” <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/325-barna-studies-the-research>, (accessed April 27, 2012).

⁴ Dave Olson, “Good Intentions, Empty Pews,” *The Covenant Companion* 8 (January 2006): 6-9.

⁵ Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Lowry, “7 Startling Facts: An Up Close Look at Church Attendance in America,” <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america>, (accessed April 27, 2012).

Pastor Bob Coy, of Calvary Chapel Church in Fort Lauderdale Florida has 18,000 people who worship.

When asked to comment on the American crisis, he said,

The next generation is screaming for a relationship with God, but the young people are seeking a new kind of relevancy and a Gospel of action. The emptiness of yesterday's liturgy has got to become relevant. I think most of us know that the church is not changing the world. In the last 20 years, our churches have softened the Gospel into a watered down opportunity to know the truth which is less effective for salvation.⁶

So with this evidence and sense of a cultural shift the only thing that can be done is to seize the opportunity. The Christian church needs to get to know this new culture and be intentional with alternative and meaningful ways to reach people with the Gospel message. Research clearly indicates that God is still active in the lives of millions of people, but the church of Jesus Christ is going to have to stretch outside of the church walls as the Great Commission directs us in Matthew 28:18-20. Believers must reach out to people where they are, showing them the relevancy and authenticity of God's Word so that they can see that only a life filled with God's Word is a life worth living.

This does not mean that the American church or any Christian church needs to shut its doors and get rid of Sunday worship, but it does mean that new venues for worship and studying God's Word need to be explored. Faith still seems to be a high priority, but the people are looking to affinity groups, the internet and the marketplace for ministry, fellowship and a way to connect to God.

Bill Hybels of Willowcreek and David Anderson, Senior Pastor of Bridgeway Community Church in Columbia, Maryland stress that if we stay on this course, the church will become irrelevant and spirituality will continue to grow as an independent

⁶ Barnes and Lowry, *7 Startling Facts*, 6.

connection to God. But we don't have to be in decline. People want to connect. When a church focuses on reaching all people in its area of influence, God gets behind it.⁷

In an article called *Faith Matters: Where Did the Mainline Go Wrong?*, Walter Mead suggests that the church started to decline because of its internal strife and aging population. The church needs to look for new methods to communicate its message. People do not go to church anymore, “because it is the thing to do” to be considered an upstanding citizen and well rounded person. Mead continues that, “Churches will not prosper if religion is considered a luxury good. It is not necessary for people who are basically happy with their lives. A church cannot be considered one club above another, it needs sustainability and must become a bedrock necessity.” His research reminds us that in Dwight Eisenhower's day, people were expected to go to church. They pledged and participated. The people who lived in the 1950s believed strongly in tradition and because of World War II and the Cold War, they were a serious generation that sought order. They were willing to pay the price to build orderly institutions. People of that generation would line up to go to church to get “the Word” from the Pastor. This wasn't as much about worship as it was the influence of the preacher.⁸

Today influence comes from all areas of life. Our media sources and technological advancements along with peer groups have become more influential. A new survey by the Pew Research Center reports that an increasing number of American adults now get their daily news from other sources other than local newspapers. Some examples would be multiple media platforms, including Internet, television, radio and national newspapers.

⁷ Barnes and Lowry, *7 Startling Facts*, 6.

⁸ Walter Russell Mead, “The American Interest: Via Meadia,” posted on April 18, 2010, blogs.the-american-interest.com (accessed April 18, 2010).

The Internet is at the center of how people's relationship to news is changing; it has become increasingly portable, personalized and participatory. Today, 33 percent of cell phone owners access news on the device; 28 percent of Internet users have customized their home page to include news sources on topics of personal interest; and 37 percent of Internet users have contributed, commented on or disseminated news via postings on social media websites.⁹

Times have changed. Authority, order, and institutions are questioned. People today tend to believe what they want to believe, for a prevailing attitude of society is that all views are accepted as authority. People are looking to find empirical evidence wherever they can as to why someone in authority should be trusted and why institutional communities are necessary.

According to Walter Mead, "To have a sustainable religion we must answer the questions of the people. We must answer why going to church is so important no matter what?"¹⁰ If the church expects its members to convince its family and friends to join, then they must be convinced that there is a great need. And that great need is modeled through changed lives that are filled with peace and joy that can only come from our Lord.

Ron Sellers, president of Grey Matter Research and Consulting in Phoenix, Arizona uses a very clear illustration to show the change that our society is going through and why people do not have the need anymore to go to church. He wrote,

If you've ever lived in an area where pickup trucks are common, you know what someone means when he says he's "a Ford man," or "a Chevy guy," or "a Dodge person." Truck buyers often are particularly loyal to one brand. A Chevy man might rather not drive a truck at all than to be seen driving a Ford or Dodge or Toyota. This pickup owner is what we call a brand loyalist. Chevrolet is not just the truck he drives, but a reflection of how he sees himself and how he lives his

⁹ PewResearch.org, "New Newscape: Americans Want More News About Health and Spirituality" (*Natural Awakenings Magazine* (June 2010): 9.

¹⁰ Mead, "The American Interest: Via Meadia," 16.

life. It means something to him. That loyalty may even have been passed down from dad and grandpa.¹¹

This is how the church used to be organized as well. If mom, dad, or the grandparents were Presbyterian, then everyone was Presbyterian and proud of it. They were born in a Presbyterian church, baptized and married in a Presbyterian church and the funeral and maybe even the grave plot were at the Presbyterian Church. But those days are long gone for most. Seller's makes the point that, "if we would just look out over our congregations over the next few Sundays, we would see that many of the people in the pews are from various denominational backgrounds. Methodist, Lutherans, Baptists and even Catholics worship together."¹²

Grey Matter Research and Consulting conducted a nationwide study among Protestant churchgoers that explored this issue. They commented,

We learned that just 14 percent of all adults attending a mainline Protestant church are completely "brand loyalty" - meaning if they had to leave their current church, they would only consider attending another church in the same denomination. Another 50 percent of churchgoers expressed a preference for their current denomination, but say they would also consider other denominations. And some 22 percent have a small number of denominations they would consider, with no particular favorite. There were 6 percent who say there are certain denominations they would avoid, but they have no particular ones they prefer. 8 percent say when it comes to denominations, they have no preference at all.

And along with fewer involved members and the decline in denominational loyalty comes the problem of church members who have little interest in denominational news and political issues within the church.¹³

Charles Arn, President of Church Growth, Inc., suggests principles that I have summarized that seem necessary for a church today.¹⁴ These principles have been proven

¹¹ Ron Sellers, "Brand Loyalty in Church," *The Clergy Journal* 87 (May/June 2010): 3-5.

¹² Sellers, "Brand Loyalty," 4.

¹³ Sellers, "Brand Loyalty," 4-5.

to be foundational for any size church and could be a goal for all Christian leaders to consider.

Principle 1: Disciple-making is the Priority

Professing Christians need to move out into the community to model the Christian life so that others will want to get to know them and then listen to the Gospel message. Maybe even join their church activities. Aging congregations tend to be more concerned with self-preservation and less concerned with its original purpose of becoming an equipping station for making disciples for Jesus Christ. The church offers so much. It has the best selling book and the power of the Holy Spirit which is so much more than the latest best-selling novel, over-priced coffee, or clubs for social and business contacts. It offers new life with Christ through a connected congregation. People are drawn to friendly places.

In a national survey of American adults who are members of various Christian churches across the country, the Gallup Organization in 2004 asked a representative sample of people how satisfied they were with their churches and with their spiritual lives, as well as the factors that contribute to a healthy church. The study uncovers the effect of church friendliness at the top of the list.¹⁵

Principle 2: Social Networks are the Vehicle

They are the modern day hospitality. A connected congregation is where friendliness is based on love and nurture. People today want to feel like they belong, are

¹⁴ Charles Arn, "The Top Five Church Growth Principles," Church-Growth.net, <http://www.rev.org/ArticlePrint.asp?ID=3292>, 2008, (accessed April 27, 2012).

¹⁵ Michael D. Lindsay, "Creating a Culture of Connectivity," *Rev. Magazine* (March/April, 2005): 48.

valued and appreciated and need to be in settings where friendships flourish. The key to keeping the Gospel message alive and for building disciples is for non-Christians to come to Christ through relationships with Christians. Friends reach friends. It is as simple as that and is the biblical mandate. The church community should be encouraged to be the conduit for the Lord through prayer and fellowship.

Glenkirk Presbyterian Church, Glendora, CA, distributed an index-sized card reminding members to pray for one person they know at one'o'clock, for one minute, during one month. Then later they were encouraged to invite one of these people to an appropriate church-related event in the next six months. They were told, "Remember that you may be God's only connection to these unreached people."¹⁶

Principle 3: Felt Needs are the Connecting Point

Most people throughout their day are thinking about their kids, jobs, friends, health, finances, and hobbies. Seldom do they think about their eternal destiny. However if they accepted the Gospel as relevant to all aspects of their lives, their thought processes could be different. An example of how Christians can impact others by addressing felt needs is in the Gospel of John, when Jesus begins a conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus began the conversation with what she was thinking about, and then he moved the dialogue to deeper issues of God.

People are looking for a place to belong and to find answers as to how to live in the pressure of a busy and stressful world. They are looking for help through transitions and they are looking for authentic relationships. People want to be understood today and

¹⁶ Win and Charles Arn, "The Master's Plan for Making Disciples," *Rev. Magazine*, (July/August, 2009):1.

because they are tired and are pulled in many directions, they need to be drawn in by a Christian community to hear the Gospel message as relevant.

Principle 4: Relationships are the Glue

Friendships develop when people share things in common, such as age, marital status, family status, interest, problems, needs and culture. But there is nothing more powerful than friendships developed around Christ. When the transforming power of the Gospel is heard, lives are changed in a unique way. The influence of the Holy Spirit produces a bond, like glue, and when these relationships are shared around a common meal lives are renewed and refreshed with God at the center. There is new birth, and a whole new meaning for living evolves.

The challenge for church leaders today will be to shift with the world views of our young people. In one of his most recent books, *Revolution*, George Barna lists seven trends of the “New Church.”¹⁷ His comments are listed in a summary form below:

Trend #1: The Changing of the Guard

The two generations that contain people in their forties, fifties, sixties, and seventies—the Baby Boomers and the Builders—are slowly and painstakingly losing their grip on power in society. It is the two younger generations of Americans—the Baby Busters (those born from 1965 through 1983) and the Mosaics (born from 1984 to 2002) that are altering the ways in which people relate to each other. New world views, lifestyle and expectations are reshaping our society. Yet a serious concern in this is that

¹⁷ George Barna, *Revolution*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2005): 42-50.

answers for spiritual guidance are being offered from sources that are not grounded in the Bible and Christian values.

An example of a strong voice that can lead people astray from a biblical worldview is *The Ford Institute for Transformational Training*.¹⁸ It offers very attractive spiritual guidance with popular speakers such as Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson and Debbie Ford. They have online courses that a person can take and seminars are made available to teach and illuminate the hidden power of our true selves through modern emotional and spiritual practices. The concern is that they disregard the Christian Scriptures and the teachings of Jesus Christ as primary authority.

Trend #2: The Rise of a New View of Life

Philosophically, America is now a postmodern society. This is where there are no moral absolutes – that is, truth is whatever an individual believes it to be. This way of thinking suggests that good citizenship requires tolerance of all points of view and behavioral preferences. The postmodern philosophy proclaims that relations are more important than outcome and the processes you engage in are more significant than the product of those procedures, which is a ‘means justifying the ends’ perspective. From this perspective the most appropriate route to influence is through dialogue, not monologue or the imposition of one’s beliefs or approaches upon others, which is a departure from the traditional sermon delivery.

¹⁸ Debbie Ford, “Transform Your Life Today,” <http://www.DebbieFord.com> (accessed April 27, 2012).

Trend #3: Dismissing the Irrelevant

One of the legacies of the Baby Boomer is that it demanded excellence in everything. The post-Boomer crowd has declared that this demand for excellence is less meaningful to them because it sometimes reflects the slickness of exploitation and manipulation. They quickly abandon anything that is not wholly germane to their personal passions and they have little patience for taking part in anything just because it is based on tradition, customs, ease, or social acceptability. Shared experiences and real adventure is what impacts them in a deeper way.

Trend #4: The Impact of Technology

Among the most overt effects on church life have been applications such as the widespread embrace of large-screen projection systems for worship and teaching events. The use of video technology for multi-site ministry and satellite delivery for congregations is increasingly popular as well as relying on web sites for disseminating ministry information. The advanced use of computers, the Internet, and e-mail has only enhanced visual design and is evident in publications and presentations in most churches today.

Trend #5: Genuine Relationships

Busters and Mosaics place a much higher premium on genuine personal relationships than do their predecessors. They are more likely to invest themselves in the complexity of other people's lives than to pass along superficial advice. They devote a greater share of their time each day to keeping up those bonds. As Busters and Mosaics

have increasing influence in the development of media content, institutional behavioral patterns, the reshaping of societal customs, and accepted notions regarding relational activity, we are becoming a society increasingly focused on personal authenticity rather than excellence in performance. In ministry and other areas, there will be an emphasis on personal stories and application through experience, instead of perfectly lined out principles of positive thinking. With this trend there will be a growing appreciation for leaders who understand and embrace social diversity.

Trend #6: Participation in Reality

In the next few years, it will become very evident that the hands-on approach to being a Christian in a non-Christian world is most appealing. With the proliferation of technology, the rise of women in positions of leadership, and the educational emphasis upon the practical rather than the conceptual, people will expect to be active and creative participants in developing the reality of their experience. With disappointment in society's leadership decisions, fewer and fewer people are willing to sit back and endure what the world throws at them.

In the church there will be more enthusiasm for creating personal dialogue with friends about spirituality in a small venue versus attending a big evangelistic event. The popularity of small groups and short-term missions will grow consistently as people benefit from a shared experience in which their contribution achieves real results and makes a measurable difference.

Trend #7: Finding True Meaning

The eternal struggle for human-kind will always be to find meaning in life. And because this cannot occur without recognizing how God has designed us and how to apply that design to the context in which we live, people are seeking meaning, direction and spirituality more than ever. Despite all the advances in technology and communications, the struggle to make sense of our place in the world has only become stronger. With the seven cultural trends described here and the massive shift in emphasis, there is an opportunity before us to try new ideas as we adjust ministry efforts to meet the renewed sense of spiritual awakening which is upon us.

George Barna concludes,

By the year 2025, the spiritual profile of the nation will be dramatically different. Specifically, only about one-third of the population will rely upon a local congregation as the primary or exclusive means for experiencing and expressing their faith; one-third will do so through alternative forms of a faith-based community; and one-third will realize their faith through the media, the arts, and other cultural institutions.¹⁹

During the time of America's founding, John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson at the end of their lives, "My friend, you and I have lived in serious times."²⁰ In James Emery White's book, *Serious Times: Making Your Life Matter in an Urgent Day*, he shows a parallel for our day to the historical impact of decisions made by Adams, Jefferson and other founding fathers. Just as their lives were significant, so will our decisions and actions make a significant impact on history.²¹ And to seize this time in

¹⁹ George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005): 29.

²⁰ Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson-Letters* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina press, 1959), 349, cited by David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001): 285.

²¹ James Emery White, *Serious Times: Making Your Life Matter In An Urgent Day*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004): Introduction.

history for the communication of the Gospel is what Jesus asks of each one of us. Jesus said, “You are the light of the World. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine” (Matthew 5:14-16).

If the research for today’s church is on target, and if perception is reality, then the Christian Church is in serious times and decisions need to be made. A Willow Creek publication cited the latest Barna research which reveals that nearly two out of every five young non-Christians express a negative impression of present-day Christianity. In 1996, a Barna study concluded that 85 percent of non-Christian Americans held a favorable view of Christianity’s role in society. However, a little more than ten years later that view has drastically changed. What is happening to cause this cultural shift today is that unfortunately there is a great deal of negative baggage and twisted claims as to what Christianity means and how it should be lived out. This is hurting our message and our testimony for Christ. Mahatma Gandhi expressed it as well as anyone when he stated, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”²²

Because our culture has become self-absorbed, fast-paced and individualized, effectively reaching those outside the community of faith is dependent on the depth and power of our daily witness. The way we treat our families and our neighbors; the way we care deeply and respond to the needs of others; the way we resolve conflict; and the way we behave in our jobs and in our leisure: these deliver a more powerful witness and message about Christ than the words we speak. In the book, *unchristian: What a New*

²² John Taylor, “User Friendly Churches: Reaching Seekers, Building Believers,” *Willow Creek Magazine* 15 (2007): 19-23.

Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons point out the disturbing reality as they quote statements of non-Christians, such as, “Christians are not like what we would have supposed Christians should be like. They’re not like Jesus.”²³

So the question remains, how do we turn this around? George Barna believes there is already a change and the crisis is beginning to turn around. It is through what he calls a “quiet revolution.” His research reveals that we are in a revolutionary age of a spiritual nature in which Christianity, personal faith, corporate religious experience and the moral contours of the nation are being reshaped. The catalyst for this revolution is our culture’s inability to provide fulfillment for millions of people who are serious about understanding their existence.

Barna calls the change agents the young “Revolutionaries” who are between the ages of 18 and 40. The hallmark will be their faith in Christ as they learn, live, teach and reach others for our Lord. They have chosen to live in concert with core biblical principles and they want to reflect Jesus. They want to focus on being a person who has compassion, who is kind, who has grace and knows how to walk into the future with the truth even when it presents tension. They are involved in some of the most controversial issues as they take a stand for justice. Global issues will concern them and they will be able to enter conversations intelligently for they believe that what they say and do will bring added value. These Revolutionaries will be men and women who protect relationships and bring together groups in peace as they strive for unity.

²³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unchristian: Change the Perception* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007): 1-4. <http://www.qideas.org/essays/unchristian-change-the-perception.aspx>. (accessed April 27, 2012).

In an article about the future of the American church, Chris Armstrong wrote that this new form of Christianity is similar to the early church. The focus will be to get back to what the great commission commanded us to do, “to go out,” and help mend broken lives, help them understand how the world works and how Christ can bring a new lease on life. The emphasis will not only be on converting the souls of God’s people, but will move to a deeper level following Christ’s example of caring deeply about the lives of anyone who is nearby.²⁴

Being rooted in the Gospel, getting back to the basics, and really evaluating the role of the church will make discipleship the bedrock of the future. This identity is what will propel the church and individuals into what God has called us to be. This would be men and women who share the same passions, and visions while impacting the community in the workplace and in the home. Christian heritage will not become lost. On the contrary, this new trend will bring the Scriptures and spiritual renewal alive while driving groups into seeking a renewed encounter with God.

The Response

This thesis-project seeks to propose a response to this American crisis by creating a venue for a brief time with God which will “seize the day” so to speak by targeting the spiritual yearning that is still active in God’s people. One of the hallmarks of our time is that people are confidently returning to a first-century lifestyle based on faith, goodness, love, generosity, kindness, simplicity and other values that are in stark contrast to the pressures of society.

²⁴ Chris Armstrong, “The Ancient Future Church,” *Christianity Today* 52 (February 2008): 1-9.

I created the *24 Hours with God* retreat as a venue that not only targets the spiritual longing in this postmodern world, but also provides a setting for those first century values. In a twenty-four hour retreat format participants will get away from their busy schedules and obligations to fellowship in small groups, study God's Word and learn spiritual formation principles for renewal and daily living. It is proposed that through concentrated learning and fellowship, transformation will occur as the Holy Spirit works deep in the hearts of God's people.

While spirituality often appears to be an individual, inward enterprise, people need community, and the retreat is one place to start. People don't want to just believe in God; they want to know God. They are hungry and they want to experience God on a daily level. In an article Tom Bandy points out that seekers are bringing with them serious questions about hope. When they come to church they want these issues addressed: If broken, how can they find healing; if lost, how can they find authentic spiritual guidance; if lonely, is the church a place that is safe and delivers healthy intimacy; if anxious, they need assurance. Victimized people are standing near the exits, but they yearn to be heard and accepted as they seek justice and self-confidence. And those who are trapped are seeking support as they break free from harmful addictions and become transformed by our Lord.²⁵

The task for the church community today during these transitional times is to be relevant and offer solutions to some of the most difficult situations. And the place to begin is to create an environment where people feel welcomed and loved and are

²⁵ Tom Bandy, "What Hard-Times Seekers Seek," Thriving Church.com. <http://www.rev.org/ArticlePrint.asp?ID=3349> (accessed April 27, 2012).

remembered by name. A sense of belonging begins where people can find a smile or a shake of the hand which promotes friendships and healthy connections.

The church community was created by our Lord to teach us how to live, how to care for each other in love, and how to draw others to Christ. In Acts we read that the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42, 47). When the church community is functioning the way God intended, it provides a sense of belonging in the same way a family does. That means not only that we gain support when trials press on us, but also that we are challenged when we become too comfortable in our own ways.

The *24 Hours with God* retreat is meant to create an environment that resembles that of a healthy family – with God at the center. In this setting, genuine conversation, authentic relationships, and the building of faith will be encouraged. Through the relevancy of Scripture and the power of the presence of God through Christ, transformation at some level should occur. The desired result will be the conversion of participants to committed disciples, renewed and refreshed thirsting for more with an awakened awareness of God’s activity in their lives through the ongoing process of spiritual formation.

Specifically, I hope to create two types of retreat venues that will involve a concentrated learning experience off the church campus to stimulate the minds of the seeker, draw people close to God and lead them eventually to attend church. One of the venues will be at a beach resort hotel suitable for an outreach retreat and the other venue

will be tucked away in the woods with few amenities for spiritual formation. Each retreat will have the same goal and yet will take a slightly different approach.

To support this initiative, in the following chapters I will discuss a theological framework, key concepts and contemporary applications. In the last chapter I will evaluate the effectiveness of the *24 Hours with God* retreats from a survey and will offer supporting conclusions and recommendations for future considerations.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Biblical Doctrine and Systematic Theology will ground this thesis-project. Broken into sessions, a retreat format will be designed so that retreat participants will explore such concepts as conversion, saved by grace, justification (regeneration), sanctification, glorification and calling on the life of the believer. With the application of thoughtful exegesis outlining essential attributes of God, the role of Jesus Christ and the work of Holy Spirit, biblical doctrine will be applied to everyday life unlocking the covenantal theology of God. With the aid of Spiritual Formation principles, retreat members will also gain an understanding of classical disciplines with the application of prayer and journaling as a primary focus. All of this is to emphasize that when God is at the center of a person's life there is a peace that surpasses human understanding.

The overall goal of the *24 Hours with God* retreat is expressed in one paragraph of Andrew Murray's book, *Secrets of Authority*.

Murray states,

The greatest lack of our faith is that we need more of God. We accept salvation as his gift, but often do not know that the main blessing of salvation is to prepare us for and bring us back to that close fellowship with God for which we were created. All that God has ever done for his people in making a covenant was to bring them to himself and to teach them to trust in him, delight in him and be one with him. It cannot be otherwise. If God is the very fountain of goodness and glory, beauty and blessedness, the more we can have of his presence, conform to his will, engage in his service, and have him ruling and working in us, the happier we will be. God's one objective in entering into covenant with us is to draw us to himself. He wants to make us entirely dependent on him, to bring us into the right position and attitude so he can fill us with himself, his love, and his blessedness.

God is at this moment living and walking with us. Let us go to God with the honest purpose and surrender to know what he wants to be in us, and to have us be to him. By doing so, we will see into the face and very heart of God.¹

As Jesus walked this earth, living and working among all kinds and classes of people, he gave them the divine paradigm for peace with God and successful living. He lived in a broken world, suffered along with the rest, was personally tempted in all the same ways and celebrated much the same, but there was a difference. While Jesus lived in the flesh, he was filled with and thus empowered by God's Spirit who was always with him.

The Bible tells God's people to be "imitators of Christ" meaning that they must walk in this world as he did. But learning how to walk "in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21), begins with a study of the Gospels and then the rest of the Bible. There needs to be a wholistic approach. By studying Jesus' life and words, while seeking to become more obedient to God – a person can walk through life with a new mindset that will bear fruit and model the way of Christ.

Down through the years in Christianity, *Lectio Divina* (Latin for *divine reading*) became a traditional practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer. In its earliest beginnings, before the emergence of the Western monastic communities, a key contribution to the foundation of *Lectio Divina* came from Origen in the third century, with his view of the Scriptures as a sacrament.² It is intended to promote communion with God and to increase the knowledge of God's Word. Traditionally *Lectio Divina* has 4 separate steps: read, meditate, pray and contemplate. First a passage of Scripture is read, then its meaning is reflected upon. This is followed by prayer and contemplation on

¹ Andrew Murray, *Secrets of Authority* (Whitaker House, New Kensington, Pennsylvania, 2002), 208.

² Raymond Studzinski, *Reading to Live: The Evolving Practice Of Lectio Divina* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2009): 26-35.

the Word of God. The focus of *Lectio Divina* is not a theological analysis of biblical passages but viewing them with Christ as the key to their meaning. In Christian teachings, this form of meditative prayer is intended to lead to an increased knowledge of Christ.

Contemplative author Richard Foster calls Jesus our “Stream of Living Water.”³ He is the voice that a person can trust to fill their lives with what will refresh them and help them to stay focused for God. Foster says, “Jesus Christ is our source, and we can speak of the primacy of the Gospels, for in them we see Jesus living and moving among human beings, displaying perfect unity with the will of the Father. And we are taught to do the same, taking on the nature of Christ likeness – sharing Jesus’ vision, love, hope, feelings, and habits.”⁴

Jesus said,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches.... My Father is glorified by this that you bear much fruit...as the Father has loved me so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.⁵

This familiar vine and branches illustration describes the activity of the Holy Spirit and how people can live as imitators of Christ, through a process in which God is at work in their lives. Using the image of the grapes on the vine, Jesus emphasized that his followers were to produce fruit and that God would help them through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament prophets had written of Israel as God’s vine – carefully

³ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998): 2-3.

⁴ Foster, *Streams*, 3.

⁵ John 15:1-17.

planted and cared for, and grapes symbolized Israel's fruitfulness in carrying out God's work in the world. What is central to their beauty and abundance is the quality of the vine. Individual branches need to be connected to a healthy vine and require attentive care. New plants are pruned for three to five years to "train" them before they are allowed to produce a crop. Although the plants are rather hearty, a problem can occur through disease and lack of productivity which can spread from branch to branch, so it is important for the Gardner to constantly pay attention to them, work with them, train them and prune the diseased or dead branches.

That is why it is so crucial for God's people to understand the work of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, because they together feed the mind, fuel the actions and live in the hearts of believers so that they can bear the fruit that glorifies God and blesses others. In light of this, Foster points out, "One of the best things we can do for one another, then, is to encourage regular immersion in the Gospel narratives, helping each other understand Jesus' perceptions into life and his counsels for growth and then making constant application to our daily experience.... We want to consider how Jesus in his living provides us a clear paradigm for our living."⁶

In his vine illustration, Jesus shows that he is the connecting piece through the work of the Holy Spirit. He wants them to see that they are not saved by God for salvation alone. Rather God looks to his people to partner with him in his mission in the world. Jesus expected the lives of his followers to produce fruit. And the way to produce fruit for the kingdom of God was set out for them in the Great Commission.

⁶ Foster, *Streams*, 3.

The Bible as a Guide to Partnering with God

The primary focus of the early Apostles was to carry out the Great Commission set out by Jesus Christ—to make disciples. Through apostolic writings and the influence of the early church, this emphasis of the Great Commission remains today. The eternal call of the Christian church is to make disciples,⁷ and the task of a disciple following Jesus Christ’s example, is to carry God’s message into the world. To be able to do this there must be a faithful working knowledge of the Bible coupled with a solid conversion experience that leads to a personal testimony. To be effective, a disciple’s testimony needs to claim the Bible at the center of their worldview, and this must be confirmed through a community that views God’s Word as its authority. The church needs to acknowledge in confession and practice the traditional view and affirmation of the Word of God as its divine message.

For Christians in every generation, the Bible is considered to be a source of life. Even when there are different circumstances in life and different interpretations, the essential tenets provide a universal connection to God through Jesus Christ. It is God’s revelation of Himself.

Reformed theology emphasizes God’s transcendence over his creation. His transcendence forms such distance between him and humanity that the only way one can know anything about God is if God chooses to reveal himself. God does reveal himself at least in part, both through typical aspects of creation, which are sometimes referred to as General Revelation, as well as in Special Revelation through the Holy Spirit. An understanding of both General Revelation and Special Revelation is necessary in the life of the believer, to pave the way for a discussion on how God communicates and works in

⁷ Matt 28:19-20.

and through his people bringing them to himself as Lord. John Frame adds more light to this:

Throughout redemptive history, God seeks to identify himself to men [and women] as Lord and to teach and demonstrate to them the meaning of that concept. 'God is Lord' - that is the message of the Old Testament; 'Jesus Christ is Lord' - that is the message of the New.⁸ Because God is Lord, He is not only knowable but known to all (Rom. 1:21). The 'agnostic' who says that he does not know if God exists is deceiving himself and may be seeking to deceive others. God's covenantal presence is with all His works, and therefore it is inescapable (Ps. 139). Furthermore, all things are under God's control, and all knowledge, as we will see, is recognition of divine norms for truth; it is recognition of God's authority. Therefore in knowing anything, we know God. Even those without the Scriptures have this knowledge: they know God, they know their obligations to him (Rom. 1:18). But in a more profound sense, only believers know God, only Christians have knowledge of God that is the essence of eternal life.⁹

When this knowledge is in view, it may be said by comparison that unbelievers are ignorant, that they do not know God...denial of God's know ability stems from a personal, moral situation; and always arise from one's personal relation to God, from a person's ethical and religious orientation...once you deny the lordship of God.¹⁰

With the above understanding, the Scriptures become more relevant for every day living. The words in the Bible are more than merely words on a page, but become a living document that reaches the whole person. All senses are made aware of God's presence and the whole person is able to discern the activity of God. Much of this is possible because of a basic understanding of how God communicates with his creation through his Word.

There are many reasons Christians believe that the Bible is the authentic Word of God. Crucial support comes from the testimony of Christ and his Apostles. Jesus viewed his Bible which is the Old Testament as his heavenly Father's written instruction, which

⁸ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987): 12.

⁹ John 17:3; Matt 11:27; John 1:14; 1 Cor 2:9-15; 13:12; 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Tim 1:12, 14; 1 John 5:20.

¹⁰ Frame, *Doctrine of Knowledge*, 18-19.

he was obligated to obey¹¹ and fulfill.¹² Paul described the Old Testament as entirely “God-breathed” and written to teach the Christian faith.¹³ Peter affirmed the divine origin of biblical teaching in 1 Peter 1:1-12 and 2 Peter 1:21 and the writer of Hebrews quoted the Old Testament in ways that demonstrate its authority.¹⁴

Since the Apostles’ teaching about Jesus Christ is considered revealed truth¹⁵ the church regards the apostolic teachings collected in the New Testament as completing the Scriptures. Peter placed Paul’s letters on an equal footing with the rest of Scripture¹⁶ to affirm the point that what is revealed in Paul’s letters is God’s Holy and inspired Word. All of these texts and testimonies were the driving force behind the Protestant Reformation doctrine *Sola Scriptura*, in which the Bible alone is the only absolute, unquestionable, authoritative revelation of God’s precepts for his people. It is a gift from God about himself so that we can come to know him.

However, as one approaches the text and the study of God they must be aware that the human being is limited and for anyone to know anything about God it is an act of God. John Frame states that human beings must recognize that human knowledge of God is covenantal in character, and in knowing God, as in any other aspect of human life, we are subject to God’s control and authority. Therefore, God’s incomprehensibility must be satisfied with the kind of knowledge that a servant may have of his Master. It is limited, yet one can know enough to have a relationship and to be obedient to his will.¹⁷

¹¹ Matt 4:4, 7, 10; 5:17-20; 19:4-6; 26:31, 52-54; Luke 4:16-21; 16:17; 18:31-33; 22:37; 24:25-27, 45-47; John 10:35.

¹² Matt 26:24; John 5:46.

¹³ Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11.

¹⁴ Heb 1:5-13; 3:7; 4:3; 10:5-7; 15-17; Acts 4:25; 28:25-27.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 2:12-13.

¹⁶ 2 Pet 3:15-16.

¹⁷ Frame, *Doctrine of Knowledge*, 40-41.

If Christians would treat the Bible as a gift from God and claim it as their own, faith, life, and the reason for living their lives would make more sense, because knowing God's authoritative will draws God's people closer to him. Our knowledge of God and of ourselves is based on his revelation, and this knowledge of God produces obedience. Then obedience to God leads us back into a deeper knowledge of God. Obedience is knowledge, and knowledge is obedience.¹⁸ In the Scriptures the two words are often used interchangeably, because, "to determine if someone knows God, we do not merely give him a written exam; we examine his life."¹⁹...The test of Christian faith or knowledge is a holy life."²⁰ So as believers approach the Scriptures seeking knowledge of God and his revelation for answers in life, they must approach the Scriptures as the most certain knowledge available.

When considering questions that plague the human spirit, such as: Where can one find the truth and answers for living? Or where can one find the peace and hope that carries them through life? There needs to be a strong conviction in the heart of the believer that Scripture is the reliable source. The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work" (New Living Translation). The Bible is a person's guide and authority. But without applying the proper amount of time that it takes to discover relevant meaning, the Scriptures can remain dead in the mind of the reader.

¹⁸ Frame, *Doctrine of Knowledge*, 41-43.

¹⁹ Frame, *Doctrine of Knowledge*, 44.

²⁰ Matt 7:21; Luke 8:21; John 8:47; 14:15, 21, 23; 15:7, 10, 14; 17:6, 17:1; John 2:3-5,4:7; 5:2; 2 John 6; Rev 12:17; 14:12.

It is said that our world is well-educated. Yet, I have come to realize that when people seek answers for living, many turn to the wrong sources and in turn receive wrong or at least distorted answers. Of course it can be debated as to what “wrong sources” would be. From an orthodox perspective, wrong sources for the most part would be voices and opinions which are in conflict with key tenets of the Christian faith grounded in Scripture. For most of the history of the Christian church, until relatively recent times, the Bible was viewed first and foremost as a witness to Jesus Christ, and that witness was contained in both Old and New Testaments. It was considered an ancient text where the Word of God was a unified testimony to the living Word. With a foundation in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity held its place in the application of church life with little resistance, but today, each area of the Trinity is being challenged.

God as Yahweh in the Christian worldview is being challenged. Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is being disputed. And along with these, the application and role of the Holy Spirit is being challenged to a greater degree. For the Bible to be perceived as the ultimate authority there must be a return to the fundamental notion of unity in the Scriptures where there is one voice and one message as lined out in the Gospel message. For the believer it must be Scripture alone as the true measure by which all other books should be judged. The Scriptures will always be God’s revelation of himself, given through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and so the Bible must be considered the inspired Word of God. The closed canon is all that is necessary for a person to establish a relationship with Jesus Christ and find peace with God. Anything more at this time in history just might have been a distraction rather than a guide into the revelation from God.

The History of the New Testament Canon

From the beginning of the early Christian church, the Scriptures have been disputed. Questioning meaning and what is considered sacred is not new. The early church in its earliest witness of the Apostles could only understand the basics. For the first Christians, who were Jewish in heritage, the Scriptures from which they sought God's guidance and illumination were the Scriptures of the synagogue, which would be the Old Testament. So the Bible of the church from its earliest beginnings until well into the second century A.D. was the Old Testament and the Old Testament alone. It was the only Scripture of the church.

That began to change by the close of the century because of two developments. The first, as expressed by Phyllis Bird, "was dependent on the growth of a new body of distinctively Christian writings bearing the authority of the 'Jesus tradition,' that is, 'the historical testimony to Jesus Christ and to what he signifies', but that alone was insufficient. The new two-part canon came into being in response to a crisis in the interpretation and authority of the old Scriptures."²¹

The crisis of Gnosticism also brought about the need for the apostolic writings because the Gnostics constituted a loose group within and outside the early Christian movement. This was characterized by a distinctive "spiritual" theology or philosophy that emphasized wisdom literature and a lesser powerful God than what the Christian Scriptures portrayed, and so the early church decided a companion testament would be necessary to make clear as to the important set of Jesus' teachings. That became the New Testament of today. Because the Jesus tradition was first passed on in oral form, in catechism, confession and then proclamation, the written documents of the Gospel

²¹ Phyllis A. Bird, *The Bible as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1982): 29-30.

message received challenges, and so the carriers of the Jesus tradition needed to find a way to secure God's truth. And with the same urgency the church of Jesus Christ needs to secure God's truth today.

There were also other Christian writings during the time that Gnosticism was so influential. These were read in public worship and cited as authoritative in the defense and exposition of the life-changing faith through Christ. Some of the most important writings for the Christian faith are the letters of Paul which were used throughout the Mediterranean as instruction from God. These are some of the earliest and most authentic witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the salvation of God's people.

This was only the beginning of what was called the life-changing Canon which made up the core of what people believed. This core message was that there is one voice and one speaker and one message of salvation – the same God and the same Gospel confessed and proclaimed by the church of its own day. The Scriptures as we have them are anointed and as one hears or reads the words, the Holy Spirit has an opportunity to change the heart and mind of the person so that they can walk through life like Christ. The Bible is unique and is the revelation of God, but all through history believers had to reinstate its importance for God's people to hear and listen to the revelation of God.

The Reinstatement of the Gospel is Necessary

The Reformers knew what it meant to keep reinstating the revelation of God. Down through the centuries, their actions were clearly an appeal to reinstate the Bible as the primary and unchanging source of the Gospel. Their understanding of Scripture was that the Bible was the self-interpreting Word of God. They set Scripture over against

those who tried to oppose the Christian Canon and its teaching. In this fundamental shift the Reformers, notably Martin Luther and John Calvin, opened the way to a revolution and deeper understanding of what is considered the essential confessions of the Christian Church.

Calvin gave a systematic and theoretical expression in his theological writing and commentaries, because he was convinced of the inspiration of God and its authenticity in its original form.

Calvin felt that the key to the understanding and the authority of scripture was the activity of the Holy Spirit speaking in scripture, but also prompting the heart and mind of the believer to recognition and assent. This 'internal testimony of the Holy Spirit' is essential to the acknowledgment of Scripture as 'the word of the Lord.' For the words themselves are merely the record of God's speaking through human instruments. Calvin's commentaries were devoted to clarifying the original and literal meanings of those words, as preparation for theological exegesis and proclamation.²²

What is important to see here is even though Luther and Calvin would have had differences, both gave a renewed emphasis to the authority of Scripture as the inspired Word of God and they both emphasized the continuing activity of God speaking to God's people. They kept the call from God alive, for they felt that the authority of Scripture could speak to the heart of all people and along side what they would have called contemporary society.

In our churches today, we institute what is referred to as evangelism to keep the message alive. Yet the concept of evangelism has become misinterpreted and lost in the confusion of distorted interpretation and biblical illiteracy. At one time the term evangelism meant bringing people to Christ through God's Word and discipleship.

²² Bird, *Bible as Church's Book*, 45-46.

Today, for many, evangelism is applied to missions, social justice and marketing the church.

Great conviction for a biblical worldview must be brought back alive in the hearts of God's people. Both Luther and Calvin held a biblical worldview together with a contemporary worldview, because they could show with great conviction how the contemporary world could be understood in light of the world portrayed in the Bible. This is the same perspective and approach that the church needs to take today. Preachers, teachers, and leaders in the church need to show the authenticity of the Scriptures in relation to the contemporary worldview. Unfortunately, the twenty-first century has drifted so far away from this way of thinking that there may be a need for another revolution.

The Value of Systematic Theology

With Gnosticism and other strong false teaching on the rise, the Christian world view is challenged and the unity and coherence of God's Word for our lives is almost gone. The crisis of the American church is that the people of God have fallen away from *Sola Scriptura* to the point that when working alongside individuals who are not filled with the Holy Spirit or have not grown in their faith, a spiritual awakening is silenced and people have become dead, lost, frustrated, and even disenchanted with the idea of the church.

Through the years, much of what I have found effective when leading adults through the Scriptures is to bring them into a solid understanding of their faith, through systematic theology. When believers or seekers study the Bible in an organized way, they

are able to develop a confidence to live by, because from a biblical perspective and worldview, they can see for themselves why they believe. Trust is the important key to claiming the Scripture texts as one's own. Because so many have been let down by authority figures throughout their lives in the church, the individuals are demanding a more authentic message with relevance that they can practice. And so, one approach is to take the time to walk God's people through the text—line-by-line. Although on the surface this may appear time consuming and even tedious, if taught with passion and strong conviction, this process can be very effective. A study of living with the text can help keep the message alive and can create the confidence a person needs to be able to claim the words on the page as their own theology and belief in God. This is a powerful way to live life and the only way to find truth and the right answers for living.

Some questions that are commonly asked are: how one can know who is interpreting what is called truth and what can be believed in the Bible? A good place to start is with the consistent messages and themes that have been passed down through the ages from testimonies of people who have walked with God. The Christian faith is founded on history, insights from those who were with Christ or knew Christ through a relationship with the Apostles. Philosophical study can help a person to know the moral values of the culture. Yet the biblical text through revelation helps us to understand God and to understand ourselves. Theology in itself is not enough when only grasped intellectually. For a person to own a concept or doctrine they must internally “see it” to “believe it” and thus the need for stories and the message of Jesus Christ.

In the text of 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul writes to remind us that God considers the Bible as his authoritative Word to live by, but even more importantly Paul uses a word

that helps us to realize that Scripture is ordained and activated by the Holy Spirit so that every time we read it, there is a personalized message waiting to speak to each individual. Paul uses the Greek word *graphe* which is translated as Scripture. This refers to the ancient writings, but what is most noteworthy is its original meaning, “to draw or to paint.” The implication is that our thinking is affected by God’s words painting pictures in our mind. The canvas of the mind is touched by the inspiration of God – literally “breathed out from God.” And as we study the Scriptures line-by-line we are able to picture what it means to live a transformed life for God. The psalmist wrote, “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalms 119:105). Reading God’s Word with the Holy Spirit’s guidance dramatically impacts how we navigate through our lives.

Wayne Grudem²³ and Louis Berkhof²⁴ would concur with the importance of a biblical understanding for navigating through life. They point out that systematic theology is the best study of the whole Bible and that what it teaches on any particular topic can be discovered when approaching the text line-by-line. Wayne Grudem comments, “I believe that theology should be explicitly based on the teachings of Scripture.... The words of Scripture themselves have power and authority greater than any human words.”²⁵ A organized efficient way of study involves collecting and understanding all the passages around a particular topic and then the information is summarized into what a person can believe as it is laid out in various places of God’s Word.

²³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

²⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959).

²⁵ Grudem, 15.

Louis Berkhof declares that, “Theology is the systematized knowledge of God, and the study of theology has two presuppositions, namely (1) that God exists, and (2) that He has revealed himself in his divine Word.”²⁶ With this understanding systematic theology informs people of what they can know about God and why they need a relationship with him. Using the tools of systematic theology, believers can see for themselves what the whole Bible teaches about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit along with many other relevant topics. It is paramount that this method of study should not only be taught in seminaries, but should also be taught in the church. Systematic theology will open the door to a biblical understanding which cannot be replaced as it leads to a conversion experience which will address the problem of biblical illiteracy in our society. By summarizing the unified teachings of Scripture through careful exegesis, an anchor for life and a biblical worldview can be fully realized as God’s people begin to develop a mind for God.

James Emory White brings out in his book *A Mind for God*²⁷ that people today are being indoctrinated by professors and so-called authority sources with the idea that there is an acceptable diversity of interpretation of the Scriptures in today’s culture. Biblical worldviews are being challenged, defamed and assaulted vigorously. And what is increasingly sad is that students and learners alike sit passively accepting statements that are just not facts. White states that human beings today, including those who call themselves Christians sit empty and passively as they are being challenged by the openness of the world.²⁸

²⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 19.

²⁷ James Emory White, *A Mind for God* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006).

²⁸ White, *Mind for God*, 11.

It is clear that so many people today, even in the church, have forgotten what it means to live with morals and integrity, let alone walk as God's people with biblical integrity and love. People today are looking for joy and peace to reside within them, but for this to happen, they must strive for "pure and blameless" lives, reflecting all that is good from God, as lined out in 2 Peter. Instead, at an alarming rate people are becoming displaced, confused and alone without a strong foundation. The world and God's church are suffering on many levels. It will take more than positive thinking, more than reading a book or two and more than just one *24 Hours with God* retreat. It will take a life touched by God's Spirit as the whole being comes to fall in love with Christ through his words. It will take a lifesaving experience that will renew strength,²⁹ but will also renew the mind to be like Christ³⁰.

Every believer is in a continuing education program whether they like it or not, for when they approach the Scriptures, God is at work and is forming their mind. God works from the inside out to bring the believer over to his way of thinking. The more believers know of Christ and his work, the more God's people are being changed to be like him and develop the mind for God. Because this process is a lifelong journey, they must become intrigued by our Savior and never stop pursuing a deep intimate knowledge of him.

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart stress that for adults to pursue a deep knowledge of God, they must be intrigued into a deeper study.

Fee and Stuart share,

Every so often we meet someone who says with great feeling, 'You don't have to interpret the Bible; just read it and do what it says.' Usually, such a remark

²⁹ Is 40:31.

³⁰ Col 3:10.

reflects the ‘layperson’ protest against the ‘professional’ scholar, pastor, teacher, or Sunday school teacher, who, by ‘interpreting,’ seems to be taking the Bible away from the common man or woman. It is their way of saying that the Bible is not an obscure book. ‘After all,’ it is argued, ‘any person with half a brain can read it and understand it. The problem with too many preachers and teachers is that they dig around so much they tend to muddy the waters. What was clear to us when we read it isn’t so clear anymore.’³¹

Fee and Stuart explain further that the reason the text is not so clear any more is because today’s application has not yet been clarified by the ancient meaning behind the text. For instance they point out:

A simple look at the contemporary church, for example, makes it abundantly clear that not all ‘plain meanings’ are equally plain to all. It is of more than passing interest that most of those in today’s church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 at the same time deny the validity of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the very context in which the ‘silence’ passage occurs. And those who affirm that women, as well as men, should pray and prophesy on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 often deny that they should necessarily do so with their heads covered. For some, the Bible ‘plainly teaches’ believers’ baptism by immersion; others believe they can make a biblical case for infant baptism. Both ‘eternal security’ and the possibility of ‘losing one’s salvation’ are preached in the church, but never by the same person! Yet both are affirmed as the plain meaning of biblical texts. Yet both are affirmed as the plain meaning of biblical texts.³²

Thus it comes to leading people through the texts for authentic and reliable truth. The most powerful influence, aside from the influence of the Holy Spirit, is the belief that the Bible is at the same time both human and divine and still has a living voice for today. As Professor George Ladd once put it, “The Bible is the Word of God given in the words of [people] in history.”³³ And so a thoughtful exegesis, with an organized and efficient way of studying the Scriptures will humbly bring forth the original and historical intended meaning, and relevancy of the message for today that will keep the people

³¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth :A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981): 13.

³² Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, 15-16.

³³ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, 17.

coming back. When individuals make a connection between God's truths and their own lives, transformation and permanent change can occur through a knowing of God's presence.

During a *24 hours with God* retreat there will be a strong emphasis on helping the participants to realize the presence of God. However, the main goal is to help retreat participants to develop or reaffirm a truly Christian worldview where they can declare to the world in some kind of testimony that God himself has spoken in Scripture. Christians want to believe that the Bible is an inspired and authoritative Word of God; now the church needs to help them. There are no short-cuts in this process, only a patient journey sought by the life-long learner that follows our Lord as his disciple. When people embrace a biblical worldview, they are then able to discern the right view of Scripture through the prompting of the Holy Spirit and exegesis of the text.

Historical tradition alone cannot compel a biblical worldview or confession. The worldview and thus confession must be lived out and experienced as God makes our calling come alive through the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians what may be the most important message of all:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ – by grace we have been saved and raised us up with him in heavenly places so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.³⁴

Paul's letter to the Philippians also celebrates this truth. Life is a celebration because of the gift that God has given us. And along with this gift is the freedom to pursue his calling on our life, the life of the church, in which the life of the unique

³⁴ Eph 2:8-10.

community is established by God through the work of Jesus Christ. The church was established by God's sovereignty and providential purpose. Therefore, when believers realize the mind they can develop as they experience God's presence, they will be already living in union with God through Christ, who is the light to all things. In John 8, Jesus said to the people, "I am the light of the world and... the light leads to life." As the creator of life,³⁵ Jesus is able to provide the light that people need in order to see the reality of their lives.

In Christ's light believers see themselves as God sees them which can be a wonderful revelation because it brings freedom to be who we were created to be. God wants his people to live their lives through the light of Christ and he will teach them how to believe as he shows them the path they are to walk. On a *24 Hour with God* retreat, a main focus will be to help participants allow God to open their eyes and hearts to what may be a new path and a new way to live their lives. Life in Christ can be exciting, but it is different as a person lives on a higher plane through the help of the Holy Spirit. Jesus came to give the human race a life of God's blessings through encouragement as he offered hope through his divine light and eternal love. This is a truth that all people should have the chance to experience and keep burning in their hearts.

In John 14:6 Jesus declared to his disciples, "I am the way and the truth and the life." He knew that he came into this world to show individuals how to find God and have a relationship with him as well as they find their own purpose and journey. Jesus knew that he is the pathway to all things because he is the visible, tangible image of our invisible God.

³⁵ John 4:4.

And so, if believers are to approach life from a biblical worldview, they will need to learn a radically different attitude from what is typical in our culture. For it is necessary for God's people to understand the way of humility. Jesus taught his followers that they must be humble in their approach to life. This means a person must respectfully live out their beliefs in accordance to God's teachings. For what a person often thinks of as truth can be far from God's truth. To know truth believers must connect with God through a life of humility and then be flexible enough to adjust their plans to his. Jesus promised, "Blessed are the pure [humble] in heart, for they will see God."³⁶

The Key to Peace through Spiritual Formation

It is commonly said that how people spend their days is how they spend their lives. For most, when they wake up in the morning their thoughts are flooded with all the things they need to do that day. As humans, the impulse is to get started on those things and accomplish all that they can. But as Christians, believers are primarily called into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and their day should begin with how to live their life for him. This is an ongoing process and that is often referred to as spiritual formation. It is a process of being conformed to the image of Christ to be able to walk in the way of Christ. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit and grounded in scripture and supported by a faith community. When believers put God at the center of their lives, they can grow closer in relationship with him and receive spiritual direction through hearing God's words. This requires a focus on maturing their relationship with God through obedience and knowledge that is imparted by God. (Psalm 46:10 "Be still...and know that I am God.")

³⁶ Matt 5:8.

From the earliest days of Christianity, believers have found it sometimes easier to hear God's direction as they join with others to discuss their spiritual lives. Christians on a journey together can sometimes even hear God clearer as they receive spiritual direction from another. Just being able to articulate personal experiences to another believer is of immense value in itself. With spiritual direction, a person can become aware of and responsive to the real presence of God both in those activities that are often called "religious" and those that are part of the ordinary routines of life.

The key to a transformational process is highly personalized, and a good place to start is through learning spiritual formation principles such as prayer, contemplation, solitude, journaling the Scriptures and practicing the presence of God. Listening to God is at the heart of the Gospel Message. God the Father said of Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."³⁷ But this is a different kind of listening. It is transformational listening as believer progress through the change in their lives.

God is our living partner who wants to guide our thoughts, emotions and our hearts every minute of the day. The Apostle Paul said that one must strive to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."³⁸ That is the ultimate goal for living, which means living in humility solely for the purpose of God, staying open and flexible enough to respond to his calling. When a person gets to the point where they feel that they are living in this world, but are not a part of it as Jesus instructed, they will find that the level of living will be different. There will be an experience of calm and peace coupled with a blessed assurance within.

³⁷ Mark 9:7.

³⁸ 2 Cor 10:56.

Jesus said in John 10:14 that his followers are like sheep, and he is like a shepherd. He said that sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd and not to a stranger, implying that believers follow him because they know his voice.³⁹ But recognizing the voice of Jesus comes over time. It is learned through experience from an intimate relationship. Unless a person knows how to distinguish the voice of Jesus from the voices of this world, they will not be able to respond to Jesus' leading. Part of what needs to be learned on the spiritual journey is how to pay attention to the leading of his Spirit.

During the weekend of spending *24 Hours with God*, participants will explore what it means to hear God's voice more clearly than ever before through prayer, Scripture and small group interaction. They will explore Scripture texts that will bring truths alive and discover God in their time alone as well as in community. By the time they leave, new truths will be learned and techniques will be applied so that the process of spiritual formation will continue from their encounters with God during the retreat.

During one of the retreats, using the book of Philippians as a guide, retreat participants will be able to understand through Paul's words what Jesus would want for a foundation in their lives. Key principles and core concepts will be explored to the point that each person will know that God created them for a purpose and that they have a high calling in God's economy. Starting from the beginning of Paul's life, the Scriptures will reveal Paul's testimony and his theology which will leave them with an idea of what inner joy could be as God intended.

It takes many forums and experiences for a person to understand the meaning and the depth of the words in the Bible. It takes someone they trust to help provide the way

³⁹ John 10:3-5.

to help them hear the good news for themselves. When burnout and stress builds up in a person's life, they begin to see no hope for a release. And before long they will forget who they are and why God created them. No longer do they feel their passions, dreams and giftedness. And they may even feel dead inside. Yet, hearing how Paul coped and rejoiced through his hardships could be the crossroad and catalyst to strong belief.

In the book *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals about Personal Growth*, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend point out that one of the biggest obstacles to spiritual growth is our view of God. If we are going to grow in relation to God, then we must know who God is and what he is really like. They go on to write that they are amazed at how unnatural it is for people to see God as he really is. They point out that Jesus knew this about the human being and so pushed them to belief in God. The Scriptures tell us in John 14:8-9 that Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." And Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"⁴⁰

Jesus came to show individuals what God was really like and how they could have a personal relationship with him, but this understanding came about through shared experiences and a lot of understanding and love. It is common for human beings to cling dearly to beliefs and attitudes as their safety net that do not line up with God's truth. Therefore a new kind of trust must be introduced through the stories in the Bible. And these must be taught by someone who really believes in their authenticity and authority and has experienced their relevance and the truths they teach. Only then can a spiritual

⁴⁰ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow: What the Bible Reveals about Personal Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001): 66.

awakening become a window of revelation, taking people to new places for a solid understanding of their personal faith in God, leading them to answers and truth, and bringing them peace in this life.

Jesus left his followers with these words found in John 14:27, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

The greatest need in the world is to experience peace. But to have peace there needs to be an understanding of the key to peace. Peace is not the product of escape from circumstances – although one may think a change in circumstances would provide them with the peace they long for. Yet in all actuality, the key to finding peace is “being at home” with oneself. This comes from being thankful for the way God has made and gifted each person. It comes from the joy of giving and appreciating all that is received. And it comes from accepting and celebrating what is good, while working on what needs to be changed.

In the words of Henri Nouwen,

Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul.... Just look for a moment at our daily routine. In general we are very busy people.... Our calendars are filled with appointments.... There is seldom a period in which we do not know what to do and we move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many ‘musts’ and ‘ought’s’ that have been handed on to us.... People must be motivated to come to church, youth must be entertained, money must be raised, and above all everyone must be happy.... What is at stake? The answer is quite simple. Our identity, our sense of self, is at stake. And our peace with God is lost.⁴¹

⁴¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1981): 21-22.

Peace is clearly related to the way a person lives. Peace is a choice. It is the choice of letting go of a negative past and with the grace of God to move on. It is the choice of fostering new friendships with those who are striving for the same kind of positive life. It is the choice of putting God first so that one can show their love and value of human life. Peace seldom comes from having all that our society is told that it needs. It does not necessarily come with great success and high esteem. Peace shows up when it is least expected, even in the midst of difficult circumstances because when God is at the center of a person's life, the Holy Spirit speaks living truth that can only be experienced through God's words.

As we have seen and discussed, biblical doctrine, systematic theology and spiritual formation are foundational aspects of the Christian walk. The purpose of this chapter was to discuss biblical illiteracy in our society today and how a revolution of reinstating the Gospel message as our authority as it is lined out in the Scriptures, is imperative for today. In order to do this, the church of Jesus Christ must live out authentically the mandate of the Great Commission to make disciples through God's holy Word. And by doing so, the human race will find answers to life and a peace that will set them free from the bondage of "this" world. Chapter 3 will provide a literature review of contemporary contributions toward Bible study and discipleship as it pertains to motivating adults to spend time with God in his Word. It will also explore and secure the method and logic that was chosen behind *24 Hours with God* retreats.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, we discussed how biblical doctrine, systematic theology and spiritual formation are necessary to increase biblical literacy in our society. While the Great Commission will always be the driving force of the church, an ever changing society necessitates a fresh voice that will impact the current culture with the message of the Gospel. This chapter will review various contemporary contributions concerning world views, discipleship, and Bible study. Such topics as the modern day disciple, the subject of faith, and the modern day community will guide the direction of this review by touching briefly on discipleship models and the relevance of theology and biblical exegesis. The purpose of emphasizing the Bible as truth and bringing God's people to salvation through a relationship with God still remains the goal of discipleship. With the *24 Hours with God* retreat as the catalyst to launch the framework for a biblical worldview, navigating through the Scriptures will hopefully inspire biblical decision-making in a believer's life.

To help highlight the complexity and misconception of what a biblical worldview is, George Barna provides a discussion between a few pastors attending a conference on discipleship strategies in North Carolina. George Barna was concerned by the lack of attention to the modern day worldview among congregations.

The discussion went like this:

George Barna begins by, “So, what do you guys do to help your people get a biblical worldview?” One pastor answered, “Well we have missionaries speak in our services several times a year. Every Sunday School class has time set aside to read a brief report and pray about faith related events.” Then the other pastor added, “What we do is preach through the entire Bible every five years. We have teaching venues, cell groups and passages focused to ensure that all the key scriptural principles receive adequate consideration.” After the pastors shared their activities, they look to George Barna for praise and said, “So what do you think?” Barna, searching for words stated, “A biblical worldview is so much more than that.” He continued, “A biblical worldview is thinking like Jesus. It is a way of making our faith practical to every situation we face each day. A biblical worldview is a way of dealing with the world such that we act like Jesus twenty-four hours a day because we think like Jesus.”¹

Competing World Views

George Barna, along with many church leaders today, observes that the Christian life is often a series of disjointed choices only marginally and inconsistently influenced by faith, by the Bible or any religious leader. Because of this complex and “going nowhere” way of thinking, Barna feels that church leaders need to challenge their congregations to take a long look at their worldview and ask themselves the question, “Is it anywhere near a biblical worldview?” Barna explains, “While most people never think about their worldview on a conscious level, everyone has one. Our moment to moment

¹ George Barna, *Think Like Jesus: Make the Right Decision Every Time* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003): 4.

decisions are shaped by the worldview we have adopted and adapted over the course of time, often without realizing that we are dependent upon such a framework for decision making.”²

Such frameworks are important to note, because whenever a decision is made about life or the world, the decision is run through a filter which shapes the framework and it guides a person’s thoughts, decisions and choices. From minor to major choices, people rely on their senses and knowledge for making decisions. For those with a biblical worldview, the Bible and Christian principles provide a framework for experiencing, interpreting and responding to reality. According to Barna, the only starting place for our worldview is with Jesus. Barna points out four ways that Jesus facilitated his worldview. First, he had a clear and reliable foundation with God as his anchor and truth for life. Second he stayed focused on what he believed to be true and with resolve carried out God’s will. Third, his basis for all evaluations, choices and experiences was through this God-ordained filter. Fourth, he then acted in confidence because of his faith in the promises of God and prayed with expectancy.³

The Apostle Paul clearly led the early church in this direction for a worldview. The model is illustrated well in the Gospels and can be learned by anyone who studies God’s Word. Paul warned believers to be cautious about opposing messages that could lead them astray. He stated clearly that only the wisdom from God should fill the hearts and mind of his people.⁴ James, the brother of Jesus, felt the same way and encouraged

² Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, 5.

³ Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, 6.

⁴ Col 2:8.

God's people: If you want to know what God wants you to do, ask God, and he will gladly tell you.⁵ This is how God's people form a biblical worldview.

What has become a challenge for the modern church of today is that many people have allowed opposing messages to form their way of thinking. Their worldview and wisdom for living are shaped by drawing on sources of knowledge and perspectives outside the Scriptures. And of course the modern church is partly responsible for this way of thinking. This is in part because down through history, the church has often separated itself from the culture so much that it doesn't explain the errors in the opposing messages. And so, when the church ignores competing outside views, combinations of belief can creep in and weaken a person's foundation for faith and trust in God. For instance, even believers who claim a biblical worldview often have woven secular alternative values into their own value system. Without knowing it, many have absorbed theological and philosophical views that are contrary to Scripture because of inadequate theological training. Barna himself confesses that years and years of listening to sermons, attending classes, and participating in Bible study groups had failed to prepare him to filter out the trash and embrace only biblical wisdom. He admits that, "Something radical and intentional needed to be done about the state of my worldview."⁶

The American church of today needs to prepare its congregation to handle competing world views, for even the slightest twist can taint the clearest wisdom found in the Bible. For instance such highly esteemed thinkers as Voltaire, John Locke, Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Anthony Flew and Richard Dawkins have had a strong influence in secular society. Highly academic lectures on such topics as: atheism, deism, nihilism,

⁵ James 1:5-6.

⁶ Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, 31.

existentialism, postmodernism, pantheism, and New Age can distort the Christian mind to the point that believers begin to question themselves.⁷ Other competing views include the popular secular humanism championed by Bertrand Russell and Karl Marx.

A person may wonder why being exposed to these competing worldviews is such a problem. One very good reason as expressed by George Barna is: “Because you become what you believe.” Boldly he writes, “American Christianity has largely failed since the middle of the twentieth Century because Jesus’ modern day disciples do not act like Jesus. They fail to represent him well, not because they are incapable of Christ-like behavior or out of an absence of good intentions, but because they do not think like him.”⁸ They don’t know what Jesus believed and are not able to see Christ as relevant for life today.

Modern Day Discipleship

The crisis of the American church rests largely upon the problem of competing worldviews as well as the need for a stronger commitment toward transformation and Christ-like living among modern day disciples. As stated previously, the only way the church can address this is by teaching Scripture so that a confidence in God’s Word can be experienced in a relevant way and lived through daily life. To think like Jesus will take a biblical foundation so that a Christ-like lifestyle can be modeled and taught to others as they commit to knowing, loving and serving God.

To have a biblical foundation takes deep commitment, transformation on the inside and a disciplined attitude, as one becomes aligned with God’s purpose. As

⁷ Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, 32-39.

⁸ Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, 40.

Wendy Miller points out, “The call to follow Jesus means learning to listen as he listens...to the voice of God.”⁹ Some individuals call this faith transformation. But the purpose of the *24 Hours with God* retreat is to become a disciple of Jesus through spiritual formation, which comes from the power of the Holy Spirit. This can be achieved through providing an environment that encourages attentiveness to what God is doing in one’s life. With this focus, a person can grow to become like Christ and thereby glorify God in the world.

Although many men and women do not know where to begin to acquire a deeper relationship with God, the American culture has opened up a window of opportunity for the modern church of America to lead the way.

In the forward of Stephen Macchia’s book, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, George H. Gallup, Jr. comments:

One of the most profound yet perhaps most overlooked trends in the U.S. over the last decade, clearly identified in national surveys, and is the surge of interest in spiritual matters and an intense hunger for God. This is coupled with another prominent trend – the desire on the part of the public for deeper, more meaningful relationships with other people, where nurture and support can be provided. Eight in ten Americans place themselves in the Christian tradition, yet the stark fact is that many of these people do not know what they believe or why. Many dutifully attend church, but this act in itself has not made them a “different person” ready to take unpopular stands on issues of the day. The bottom line is that many who place themselves in the Christian tradition are wandering about in spiritual confusion and uncertainty.¹⁰

Macchia’s point is that the world is desperate for a relevant Gospel and an effective church filled with the healthiest disciples, whose lives are Spirit filled and show evidence of their Christian faith. But these disciples must also be able to balance the secular culture as they walk the Christian faith. The challenge is still before us to model for our

⁹ Wendy J. Miller, *Jesus our Spiritual Director: A Pilgrimage through the Gospels* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room Books, 2004): 76.

¹⁰ Stephen A. Macchia., *Becoming a Healthy Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004): 19.

modern day community the act of discipleship, which is still the core of the Christian walk. Churches need to get in touch with an answer for this age old problem.

Dr. Luder Whitlock wrote:

The Spiritual Quest is about encountering God, but it is about more than that. Spiritual seekers have a great deal of information available to them regarding the gospel that can guide them into an authentic relationship with God. Many books offer suggestions on how to grow spiritually. Devotional literature abounds. With all of this information readily available and the increased interest in spirituality as of late, why don't we see a greater behavioral difference between church members and non-church members? It surely cannot be attributed to a high level of public virtue. If anything, morality seems to be in decline. One major problem may be that Christians do not have a clear idea about how they should change. Many Christians seem unsure of the transformation God expects.... If we expect Christians to attain spiritual maturity, then we must clearly describe what spiritual maturity looks like so that they know what they are striving for.¹¹

The Subject of Faith

The level of spiritual maturity necessary for a healthy modern day disciple requires knowing and understanding how to consistently walk by faith. Faith is a gift that God has designed us for, but it must be exercised and practiced. Three thoughts from C. S. Lewis give examples of how this can become a process for most people. The first thing that helps is to realize that we all use some kind of faith every day. Lewis explains that while it is possible to deny religious faith, it is impossible to avoid faith altogether. We have faith in the doctor, faith in the grocery store, faith in the person who asks us for a date. We even have faith in transportation systems and the mail service. The scientist has faith in the scientific method learned from previous scientists. The reality is that to exercise faith is natural. And so, the next thing to realize is that faith is simply trust and

¹¹ Luder G. Whitlock, *The Spiritual Quest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000): 9.

can be applied to a particular situation. But as Lewis points out, “Trust is only possible when there is some measure and exercise of faith.”¹²

Yet Lewis also suggests that faith is only as valid as the object in which it is placed. Trusting an untested food, an unqualified doctor or a dishonest person, are not examples of valid faith. And so his third thought is that testing the reliability of objects of faith is rational and certainly advisable, for this is what produces the trust. Wisdom leads us to investigate the true facts of any object of our faith to know if it is rational. If a person must adjust their way of thinking they can, but only when it is the most sensible thing to do or is the only thing that they can do. A simple example would be if a clock is wrong, we adjust it. It’s the sensible thing to do. A tougher example is when a person is very sick, radical treatment may be the only thing they can do, trusting upon the credibility of the doctor.¹³ So with these thoughts, we can see that having faith and exercising trust is a normal and necessary part of our lives.

Where it gets tricky for Christians is that our faith is based upon the reality of proof of a person’s or a collective body’s experiences. It is also based on the words of Scripture and on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. But for the analytical philosopher Antony Flew, this is not enough. He states, “To the person who is searching, religious assertions incapable of being tested objectively are meaningless.”¹⁴

To illustrate his point, Flew relates a graphic tale told by John Wisdom:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943): 24.

¹³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 24.

¹⁴ Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955): n.p.

is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells’ *The Invisible Man* could be both smelled and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the skeptics despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”¹⁵

Scholar John Montgomery comments on the story by asserting that we do have proof. “In Christianity we do not have merely an allegation that the garden of this world is tended by a loving gardener; we have the actual, empirical entrance of the Gardener into the human scene in the person of Jesus Christ (John 20:14-15), and this entrance is verifiable by way of his resurrection.”¹⁶ But even with Montgomery’s claim the church receives contrary assumptions.

In Paul E. Little’s book, *Know Why You Believe*, he brings out that where people place their faith often comes from exposure to a myriad of circumstances.

Paul Little writes,

We live in an increasingly sophisticated and educated world where new choices compete for our attention. Unknowingly, our certainties become diluted with attractive indulgences and then our belief systems wobble. This kind of world heightens our need to know why we believe and examine the truths to support that belief. What truths do we live by? On the important question of whether Christianity is rational and can withstand scrutiny, we begin with the widely misunderstood word faith.”¹⁷

George Gallup, Jr. declares that, “Today is a historical moment of opportunity for the churches of America and their faith communities to ‘Seize the day’ as they make a

¹⁵ Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” n.p.

¹⁶ John, W. Montgomery, *Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure* (Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin 8, Spring, 1956): 45-75.

¹⁷ Paul E. Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000): 12.

wholesale commitment to encouraging people through God's grace to come into a transforming personal relationship with the living Christ."¹⁸ For the American church to tap into this opportunity it will need to begin by studying the writings of the Apostle's which are full of examples to help the Christian church of today to understand how to seize the day. Christ is the visible image of the invisible God and it is through his presence in believers that others are converted. By walking in faith in Christ one can walk in true discipleship with Christ. God's people are the living proof. As Scripture reminds believers, we are the light of the world and we are to shine like stars for all to see. Paul wrote, "Let your lives shine brightly before them. Hold tightly to the Word of life."¹⁹

The Apostle John develops a similar theme around the attribute that God is love. He felt that if Christ's disciples shared faith through the concept of love, others would come to faith. John thought that a full understanding of God's love (meaning God is the source of all love; God models what genuine love is; and God commands his people to love each other) would lead to growth of the church of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit—all because of love.²⁰

Amy Carmichael, a Protestant Christian missionary in India and author of many books, believed that our love can translate into God's love to those who face a bleak future. She wrote, "All believers in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior become ardent lovers – the kind of lover who sets others on fire."²¹ Biblical love is contagious. It is a dynamic power that awakens people through passion and reality. But to truly understand how John

¹⁸ Little, *Know Why You Believe*, 12.

¹⁹ Matt 5:13-16; Phil 2:14-17, the New Living Translation.

²⁰ John 4:7-12.

²¹ Amy Carmichael, *Candles in the Dark*, (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1982): 107.

would have taught the concept of love, it needs to be placed in context as defined by the cultural circumstances for that day. When this is done, the Scriptures will be put into perspective by the leading of the Holy Spirit and a divine encounter will occur. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in the seeker that will make the Christian faith come alive and become real.

Studying the Bible can be fascinating intellectually and spiritually, but for a church leader to make it relevant there must be a link from the past to the present. This can be done through respectful exegesis and exposure to systematic theology. For example, the Greek language has four words for love, each denoting a different kind of love. The first is *eros*, which relates to sexual passion; second is *storge*, which refers most often to family devotion; third, there is *philos* which is friendship and then the fourth is *agape*, which refers to loving-kindness, compassion, and unselfish sacrificial love. This is probably the truest of all love and is the one that John used to characterize God's sacrificial love for others. Agape love was modeled through Christ's life. When a person learns this emphasis intellectually along with being touched by the stories of Jesus spiritually, they have a wonderful example as to how to love others unconditionally as they realize God's great love for them.

Agape love can be a powerful witness even in our modern day. For instance, agape love can be applied to the needs of God's people when it comes to loneliness. Loneliness has become an epidemic for men and women in our society. The feeling of loneliness is different from being alone intentionally. Family Practitioner, Laura D. Gratton quotes Dr. Jeffrey Geller on the issue of loneliness:

Being alone can be a very positive state of being – a time for reflection, contemplation, and self-assessment. Loneliness is totally different. The feelings

of isolation that come from not being part of a group or social network where we feel we are in touch with one another and can share our daily burdens can, over time, become unbearable, as connecting with others is vital to both our mental and our physical well-being. Chronic loneliness is often associated with, or at the very least, is a precursor to, many other mental problems. It is closely linked to depression and social anxiety syndrome and, if unchecked, can lead to feelings of hopelessness and despair.²²

Human beings are made to share daily burdens. They are created to connect both physically and mentally. People need help to find a place to belong in this world. It is estimated that more than one in three people among our families, friends, and coworkers are lonely. If a person would notice when standing in line at a grocery store the people ahead of them, they can be sure that one out of the three ahead are lonely. If a person would consider their neighbors, the ones next door, across the street or the ones who live behind their house, they could find someone who is lonely. This would also be true if you considered a family of four. One of the members deep inside feels alone in this world.

With the increase of technology, things have only become worse. Randy Frazee, author of *The Connecting Church* and *Making Room for Life*, says that Americans are suffering from “crowded loneliness.” This is an overexposure to people without a deep connection with any one person or group of people.²³ To begin to turn this around, people need to create a path to connection. The *24 Hours with God* retreat is a beginning and touch point for group life. On the retreat there is study, but there is a powerful dynamic where people share their faith, begin to trust and realize that they walk in community. This brings then the need and desire to be encouraging to one another

²² Jeffrey Geller, “Loneliness: An Overlooked and Costly Health Risk Factor” *Minnesota Medicine* Volume 83 (April 2000), <http://drgratton.hubpages.com/hub/overcoming-loneliness> (accessed April 27, 2012). Dr. Geller is the Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

²³ Randy Frazee, “Loneliness,” *Discipleship Journal* 12(November/December, 2007): 44-52.

through the kind of hospitality that was prevalent in the first century church, not only in the homes, but also in and through everyday life. Genesis 2:18 reminds us that God knew it wasn't good for men and women to be alone, and this is proving to be true.

In an interview that I had with the clinical chaplain at Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, it became evident that there is quite an opportunity for *agape* love and discipleship on the floors of the local hospital. The Chaplain shared that over the years she has encountered many people in the hospital who are lonely and in need of a true connection with family or friends. She explained that many folks move to South Florida from the northern states thinking they have entered paradise and "have arrived." They leave their jobs, their homes, often their children, church, family and friends in exchange for beaches, golf and beautiful weather. The only problem is that they don't plan on getting sick. The Chaplain says patients feel isolated and devastated at a deep level. They are disappointed for they walked away from their true foundation. They say to her, "It wasn't supposed to be this way." They are lonely, for all true ties are broken.

The Modern Day Community

As Eugene Peterson expressed in *The Message*, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."²⁴ This is the heart of the Gospel message: God sees the loneliness of the world and loves his creation enough to pursue it through relationships such as in neighbors and friends. Jesus came to establish a community of believers in Christ and every generation needs to keep the fire burning within community and beyond. But it all begins on the individual journey. Through the pursuit of daily prayer, Bible study, and reflection in a quiet place of retreat, learning to practice God's

²⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1993), John 1:14.

presence through daily living, a disciple of Christ can be born and the message and love of God can be passed to others.

Christian authors Philip Yancey and Reuben Job say that in all their years of ministry, their “spiritual checkup” is in the form of a retreat. Through respectful study and contemplation they are able to hear the voice of God. Job writes, “One cannot live on borrowed faith alone. None can hitch hike on another’s spiritual journey. We can have companions along the way, but ultimately each person must live and die by his or her own faith experience.”²⁵ Each person must own and claim their own faith as they trust in God.

Yet the private journey is only the beginning. In his classic work John Stott reminds the believer, “The Christian life ... is not just our own private affair. If we have been born again into God’s family, not only has he become our Father, but every other Christian believer in the world, whatever his nation or denomination, has become our brother or sister in Christ.”²⁶ That is also exercising agape love. Spending time with God on a retreat is a time when a person can feel a connection and begin the challenge of spiritual maturity by being immersed in his Word. But the purpose is also to be able to share this connection with others.

Dallas Willard at a pastor’s conference in 2001 described what needs to take place in the individual at a spiritual retreat. The right opportunity needs to exist for the hearts and minds of God’s people to meet change. He described it as spiritual formation, but with the words, “shaping of the inner person.” Willard stresses that a person must be shaped with the words of Christ to the point where the inner person naturally flows with

²⁵ Reuben P. Job, *A Guide to Retreat for All God’s Shepherds* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994): 136-37.

²⁶ John Stott, “Basic Christianity,” *Christianity Today Magazine* (April 2001): 64.

Christ-like integrity and character through the process of transformation. It comes from the person seeking God in quiet contemplation.²⁷ Spiritual formation of course is driven by the classical spiritual disciplines that Richard Foster, founder of *Renovare*, committed himself to when he began the process of influencing renewal in the church. He learned that there is a way to feed the spiritual hunger that exists in so many people.

Foster first formed his views in his early years when he discovered devotional masters of the Christian faith such as Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi and Julian of Norwich. He was also driven to such contemplatives as Brother Lawrence, Teresa of Avila, John Woolman and A. W. Tozer. It was evident to him that these men and women were in touch with God. As Foster sought spiritual truth he wrote, “They knew God in ways far beyond anything I had ever experienced. Or even wanted to experience! But as I continued to soak in the stories of these women and men who were aflame with the fire of divine love, I began desiring this kind of life for myself. And desiring led to seeking and seeking led to finding. And what I found settled me, deepened me, thickened me.”²⁸

Foster knew that, “The inner reality of the spiritual world is available to all who are willing to search for it”²⁹ and yet so many people in our society who say they want it, don’t take the time to seek it. People don’t realize the wonderful gift that God has for them and why choosing a road of discipleship is important. To be a disciple of Christ means a person is a follower, a learner, and a reproducer of the faith. They choose the road of discipleship and as Stephen Macchia points out, a follower of Christ must “live a life of prayer which launches the pilgrimage of developing life patterns that prioritize the

²⁷ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation for Real Life and Ministry in the Twenty-First Century” (address, Pastors Convention, San Diego, CA, February 2001).

²⁸ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1998): xiv.

²⁹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 23.

will of God for their lives as they establish a relationship with him. Study of the Scriptures is the daily nutrient that feeds our soul. Through God's Word one can see more clearly into the heart of God as they learn his precepts for life."³⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ and without discipleship, Christianity doesn't exist, because following Jesus activates the Christian faith."³¹

The crisis in the American church is primarily due to the fact that so many mainline churches have allowed the authority of Scripture to be watered down or made boring to the point that people in general have lost interest. Religious leaders are paralyzed as to what to do and some have fallen prey to their own devices. A few have tried to address the problem, but there is not a quick answer. It is like a large cruise liner that must turn around. It has to turn slowly and deliberately while many on board help to change the course. Dallas Willard has commented that the church puts too much emphasis on who is saved and who is not and is failing to teach discipleship, to walk people into the depths of an encounter with God. One result of this is a lack of emphasis on discipleship characterized by agape love. Using himself as an example Willard says, "Discipleship is the relationship with Jesus Christ in order that I might take on his character. As a disciple, I am learning from him how to live my life in the kingdom as he would if he were I. The natural outcome is that my behavior is transformed."³²

In *The Complete Book of Discipleship*, Bill Hull states that a problem has been, "We've used the great doctrine of justification by faith and God's grace to teach that

³⁰ Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Disciple*, 82.

³¹ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006): 15.

³² Dallas Willard, *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006): 16.

people don't really need to follow Jesus to be Christians."³³ The church has backed off teaching how to "go" into the world, and this must change. Which brings the discussion right back to the fact that the church must get back to teaching the Scriptures in a relevant way while creating venues where men and women study and share as they are being renewed by the Spirit and one another. The church needs fewer programs and entertainment, and more of the authenticity of a real conversation on how to "go" into the world and "be" a disciple. Quite frankly what the church of today needs to do is learn from its legacy. The first century church knew exactly how to create an environment for learning discipleship. Agape love flowed naturally for most and if it did not flow naturally, it was taught.

The Thessalonian church is a wonderful example of a body of believers who are known for their Christian faith, their love and witness for Christ and their love for each other. The church was so influential that their faith and way of life impacted a whole town. Paul emphasized their enthusiasm by saying that the whole province heard their eagerness for Christ like a "trumpet." There were no building campaigns or fancy programming; it was only about Christ and his message. As Douglas J. Brouwer has expressed, "It's not about building programs, budgets, and attendance. It's about Jesus. We need to stay focused on him. We spend too much of our time and energy on the side issues. We need to keep the main thing, the main thing, knowing and following Jesus into the world."³⁴

³³ Hull, *Complete Book of Discipleship*, 17.

³⁴ Douglas J. Brouwer, (sermon, First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, May 2011).

Discipleship Models

In his comprehensive overview of discipleship, Bill Hull highlights three main ways that Christian organizations have tried to address this problem through models of discipleship. Hull labels them as, Classical Discipleship, Spiritual Formation and Environmental Discipleship.³⁵

Classical Discipleship Model

In the mid twentieth century with the rise of organizations such as Navigators and Campus Crusade for Christ, the classical discipleship model gained momentum. This model includes one-on-one mentoring, a disciplined program of Bible study, Scripture memorization, and training in how to witness and share the faith. The greatest advantages of this kind of discipleship model are that commitment to Scripture and methodical implementation of training was the focus and it was a method that our society embraced. The classroom learning model was welcomed and impacted many. However, the classical discipleship movement did not address the aspects of religious experience that brings about deep change within. From Hull's point of view, the person's inner life was not addressed. "As a result, people grew weary of a spirituality that required completing programs that didn't offer lasting change."³⁶ For many, as soon as the program ended, so did the inner spiritual growth.

³⁵ Hull, *Complete Book of Discipleship*, 17-21.

³⁶ Hull, *Complete Book of Discipleship*, 18.

Spiritual Formation Discipleship Model

From there evolved the spiritual formation model. This was a movement that came about as a result of the inner life needing spiritual nourishment. The spiritual formation movement recaptured ancient exercises practiced by Jesus, his disciples and contemplative monastics. In the time of the Reformation, Hull reminds us that the Protestants had stripped the Gospel of its “own imagination”³⁷ and mystery by throwing out many ancient practices. The strength found in spiritual formation was that it became a very effective process through which individuals who have received new life through the inner working of the Holy Spirit could understand how they were becoming like Christ. It gave the person some key aspects to watch for in their spiritual growth. However, the down side of the spiritual formation model is that if it is not exercised in partnership with Christian principles, other secular and spiritual views are able to leak in and dilute the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Thus the need arose to distinguish the movement as specifically Christian spiritual formation, using the Bible and the study of theology as its foundation together with a lifestyle of prayer and contemplation. “This created a more thoughtful approach to transformation”³⁸ and caused the 21st century person to slow down and hear God as they focused on what was going on in and around them.

Environmental Discipleship Model

The third model can also be referred to as a relational environmental discipleship model. Words that have been imported to this environmental discipleship movement are

³⁷ Hull, *Complete Book of Discipleship*, 18.

³⁸ Hull, *Complete Book of Discipleship*, 19.

community and congregation. In Hull's opinion, one of the least, developed concepts in discipleship has been how the impact of the environment of a community determines what thrives within a group. Along with an attitude of resistance to authority in today's society, there is a tendency toward an acceptance of just about anything. Tolerance of diverse views is highly regarded. It is commonly accepted that all people have their own way to relate to God and the world. Of course this leaves the challenge as to which Gospel should be followed and what convictions should be held. The question for the modern day community is: how does it embrace diversity. As Hull reminds us, "Evangelical convictions are considered as mean spirited and maybe even as far as hate speech for lack of perceived tolerance."³⁹ This perception creates barriers that are not easily broken through. Yet it can be done.

A possible solution to this lack of trust could be through the kind of study that leads to a person's ability to see God's truth in the Scriptures for themselves. A method of line-by-line Scripture study together with a process of discernment in my mind is a good place to start. And so I would like to suggest a fourth model in the pages to come. With this fourth model the goal will be for the individual to learn about God, take ownership of God's Word, and be changed by His Spirit.

The Relevance of Theology

The late A. W. Tozer once said, "What we believe about God is the most important thing about us. What we believe will drive our actions, our attitudes and our

³⁹ Hull, *Complete Book of Discipleship*, 20.

view of the world.”⁴⁰ This brings us right back to the importance of forming a biblical worldview. The relevance of theology as the study of God is most effective for God’s people today through the life of Christ and testimonies found in the whole Bible.

John H. Armstrong commented,

Theology has fallen on hard times at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is viewed by many as obscure, arcane, and irrelevant. Churches search for leaders who are practical. Good communicators, good administrators, good counselors, true visionaries – that is what we need. But God save us from theologians! They will only add to our problems. Truly odd is the church that makes “a good theologian” a serious expectation for its pastor. And odder still is the church committee that asks theological questions of a pastoral candidate. Simply put, pastors who care about theology find the going rough in most churches. People do not read theology these days; much less care about it. The word itself makes some cringe. And assessing blame does not solve the problem. What is needed are models – models of leaders and of churches where theology really does matter and is done well.⁴¹

St. Augustine said it best when he acknowledged the need for God, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁴² It was this way before Jesus and even more so after Jesus to this day. People are restless and the Church needs to help God’s people find him. For the church to connect people to God in a life-changing way, theology (the study of God and his relation to the world) is essential.

With Armstrong’s comments in mind, this thesis proposes a fourth discipleship model. This model is called the exegetical discipleship model. By using the strengths from the other three models together with the exegetical discipleship model, diversity of God’s people can be satisfied and different learning styles can be addressed. But for the purpose of the *24 Hour with God* retreat, the exegetical discipleship model will be the

⁴⁰ Paul E. Little, *Know What You Believe* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries, 1999): 25.

⁴¹ John H. Armstrong, “Theology Why Bother?” *Reformation and Revival Journal: A Quarterly for Church Leadership* Volume 11 (2002): 7.

⁴² St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 3.

main focus, while keeping in mind the rapid and often disconcerting cultural and social changes of our day.

In Fort Lauderdale alone, projections for the future show a shift in demographics and diversity of population that will impact the way most churches in South Florida will need to carry out ministry.⁴³ This will take even more precautions to guard against intellectual anemia and cultural irrelevance. The church needs to guard against being marginalized and looked at as just one option out of many for a place to go for needs to be met. John Hannah, professor of historical theology at Dallas Theological Seminary shares his view:

When the message of the church merely affirms the morals of the culture or makes us more culturally identifiable, the church has ceased to be the church.... If we aim to promote the fruit of Christian faith without its foundation in the knowledge of God in Christ, we are not any different.... A culture that marginalizes rational reflection has infiltrated the church of the Savior.... This is because we live in a world that generally appreciates knowledge for its pragmatic and utilitarian ends rather than as substantive essence. The Bible asserts that the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge.... The source of our knowledge of God, which is the meaning of the term "theology," is fundamentally Word and Spirit related. Theology is the fruit of the study of the Word that is the voice of God.⁴⁴

Professor John Frame who teaches systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida describes well the merging of Bible study and the study of theology for today's church by saying, "Theology is the application of the whole Bible to the whole of human life. Theology is not an attempt to articulate our feelings about God.... Theology is rather, teaching the Bible for the purpose of meeting human needs. It answers human questions, tries to relieve doubts, applies texts to life-situations. The

⁴³ US Congregational Life Survey (First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 2011).

⁴⁴ John D. Hannah, "The Place of Theology in the Postmodern World: Is the Study of Theology and History an Antiquated Discipline?" *Reformation and Revival Journal, A Quarterly for Church Leadership* 11 (2002): 14-16.

broadest term I know to describe everything theology does is the term ‘application’; hence my slogan, ‘theology is application.’”⁴⁵

The Apostle Paul tells believers to find, test, and approve the will of God by making our bodies living sacrifices, renouncing conformity to the world by being transformed by the renewal of our minds.⁴⁶ In Philippians, Paul prays for the people asking that, “your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.”⁴⁷

Theology is the process of understanding what the Scriptures reveal about God. Theology as a part of discipleship is how one learns to follow, learn, discern and apply what is best for life. The exegetical discipleship model is a methodical and organized way to study the Bible so that men and women can come to learn how to apply the essential tenets of the faith through spiritual formation in a more efficient manner. This method is imperative for anyone to live joyfully in this world through Christ as it brings an understanding and depth like no other. The exegetical discipleship model will open the door to a divine encounter, as the living God communicates through His Word, which challenges the mind of today which competes with a biblical worldview.

⁴⁵ John M. Frame, “Studying Theology as a Servant of Christ,” *Reformation and Revival Journal, A Quarterly for Church Leadership* 11 (2002): 46.

⁴⁶ Rom 12:1-2.

⁴⁷ Phil 1:9-11.

Proposed Exegetical Discipleship Model

When considering a model for discipleship that includes exegesis, one needs to ask the questions: why should the average Bible student need to learn how to do exegesis? Does it really matter at the end of the day if someone other than a pastor or spiritual leader knows how to exegete a text? The answer of course is yes. It does matter. Not only should those who desire to preach and teach God's Word need a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, but students of the Bible should have a working knowledge of the Scriptures. Most likely this would not be at the same advanced level, but there needs to be at least an understanding and trust level as to what God's Word is trying to communicate.

Robert Chisholm's words summarize this thought very clearly: "In my opinion a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek is essential, not optional. As more people learn the biblical text they will gain a renewed excitement about the Old and New Testament as they hear it 'come alive.' This will help them become more rooted in its understanding of God and his purposes."⁴⁸ He then goes on to say why pastors and teachers fail to exegete the Scriptures. He maintains that it is because

Text-based, expositional preaching is considered irrelevant or not conducive to church growth and prefers to moralize or trivialize the text in the interest of so-called application and contemporary relevance. This is to conclude that looking at the original text is a waste of time. With the popular trend of being more "reader-centered" in interpretation, the main line church is leaning towards substituting eisegesis for exegesis and is devoid of biblical authority.⁴⁹

Dispute over biblical authority is a problem and the growing trend for eisegesis (reading into the text) over exegesis is only going to force the Bible to mean something

⁴⁸ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998): 7-8.

⁴⁹ Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition*, 8.

that fits societal beliefs of the day instead of allowing the Bible to speak for itself. The goal of eisegesis is often to prove a point that people already believe in. And to some extent, all people who study the Scriptures have a “private interpretation.”⁵⁰ Respectful and humble exegesis is to represent God’s ideas from a wholistic approach. This is where systematic theology is helpful. A person needs to live with the text so that exegesis can lift the Scripture to a place of authority over one’s life.

The church of America needs to always begin with *Sola Scriptura*. This is a Latin term meaning “Scripture Alone.” It is one of several Protestant beliefs to come out of the Reformation. This doctrine says that Scripture alone is the primary and absolute source of authority, the final court of appeal, for all doctrine and practice.⁵¹ Helping the seeker and Bible student to be able to see the value in a basic working knowledge of the Bible can lead to Scripture being elevated to a high and holy place in a person’s life. Study can be done slowly and made interesting by taking a text and showing how exegesis is done line-by-line while relating it to familiar examples. Granted, not everyone will have the patience for such a task, but as Chisholm mentioned above, when the text “comes alive” by itself and with the aid of a gifted communicator, words will lift off the page and into the heart of the seeker while the Bible student becomes curious to learn more.

God’s people are looking for insight and direction and they often assume that just because a spiritual leader or pastor has gone to a seminary, they are the only ones who should be trained to exegete a text. This is of course not correct, and there is the additional problem that not all seminaries teach sufficient Greek and Hebrew so that their

⁵⁰ Patrick H. Young, “Definition of Eisegesis,” The Young Earth Creation Club, <http://www.creationists.org/definition-of-eisegesis.html> (accessed April 27, 2012).

⁵¹ Robert M. Bowman, “Definition: Sola Scriptura,” <http://www.rmbowman.com> (accessed April 27, 2012).

graduates can exegete texts, let alone are able to preach exposition responsibly. As Chisholm reveals, “One cannot preach credibly and competently from the Old Testament without a working knowledge of Hebrew and basic exegetical skills.”⁵²

Misrepresentation of the text may occur because of numerous translations, language tools, and commentaries. That is why there must be a personal discovery and confidence level of the Bible student as they work through basic methods for exegeting texts, which are readily available.

For the purposes of the *24 Hours with God Retreat*, the primary goal for the participant is not to be able to parse Greek or Hebrew. The primary goal is to understand the process and the meaning behind words as exegesis is applied. And then over time confidence will build, there will be an assurance of the text and through the Holy Spirit, one will be able to apply the text to life. Exegesis answers the question: *What did the text mean to its original audience?* But it can also answer: *What does the text mean for everyday life?* There are many approaches and even methods for exegesis. Moises Silva suggests that the most important place to begin is to interpret the original message. He continues, “The task is to appreciate what the ancient text and other believers saw as they were motivated by the questions of relevance in the Scriptures.”⁵³ If down through the ages, those who have gone before us should care about the text, then shouldn’t the contemporary believer of this day? Sure it can be risky but, the attention that Silva gives to the significance of the text should encourage those who study the Scriptures to appreciate and enter into the text with the concern for relevance as the Scriptures are interpreted. “To skip over such detail is folly and has no depth or foundation of meaning

⁵² Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition*, 10.

⁵³ Moises Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method: Galatians as a Test Case* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996): 16-17.

when it comes to God's Word to the reader. In any case, we can never be satisfied with a particular interpretation simply on the grounds that it is favored by a great scholar; we must make every effort to evaluate the arguments offered to support it."⁵⁴

As seen in the following examples, even responsible exegesis could be considered heretical, and that is why some church leaders have discouraged it, but it must be done so that God's Word lives on. Early church father Jerome, writing in the fourth century A.D. commissioned by Pope Damasus wrote, "My concern is that some readers, whether they are educated or not, will realize that this translation does not agree with what they are accustomed to and will react against me with abusive language, calling me an evil person and a forger for having the audacity to add anything to the ancient text, as though I were trying to make changes or corrections to it."⁵⁵ His task was to revise the Old Latin translation of the Bible to one that could be better understood. And though his concerns came to be a reality for him, the version Jerome produced - the Latin Vulgate - became the standard Bible of the Western church for a thousand years.

The history of the translation of the Bible into English is full of stories that carry rejection and outrage because translating the Scriptures has been a sensitive subject down through the ages. The first English translation of the entire Bible was completed in 1382 under the direction of John Wycliffe. Wycliffe was an Oxford theologian who tried to impact the world with a better biblical understanding, but was severely attacked by being called, "the great arch-heretic" who undertook "of a malicious purpose" to translate the Bible into English and "purposely corrupted the holy text."⁵⁶ His followers were

⁵⁴ Silva, *Explorations in Exegetical Method*, 22-27.

⁵⁵ F. C. Grant, *Translating the Bible* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury, 1961): 36-38.

⁵⁶ F. F. Bruce, *History of the English Bible*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 22-23.

harassed, imprisoned and even some were burned at the stake. In 1428, forty-three years after Wycliffe died, his remains were dug up and burned by order of the church.

William Tyndale did not have it much better. Even though he has the distinction of being the first to produce a printed version of the New Testament in English, which was also the first English version translated directly from the Greek, his opponents followed him relentlessly, eventually kidnapped him, later imprisoned him and then burned his body.⁵⁷ All of this is to point out how challenging it is to seek accuracy of the Bible, translate it and exegete a text to meet expectations. It must be done with humility and responsibility. However, it must be done because much good can be achieved, as we have seen from these life stories. Mark Strauss cited that, “Tyndale’s work was published in 1526 and copies were smuggled back into England.... Tyndale’s idiomatic translation captured the hearts of the people. Its widespread use was a key factor in the growing acceptance of English translations by the reading public, and its language and style had a major impact on all subsequent versions.”⁵⁸ And yet he was still persecuted for what he did.

Exegesis is something that we all do in our everyday lives to communicate and understand a conversation or a statement where there must be assessment. When the Scriptures are exegeted, it is much like the goal of a translator. Translators are to reproduce the meaning of a text that is in one language (the source language) as fully as possible in another language (the receptor language). Herbert M. Wolf writes, “The goal of a good translation is to provide an accurate, readable rendition of the original that will

⁵⁷ Bruce, *History of the English Bible*, 24-53.

⁵⁸ Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998): 10-11.

capture as much of the meaning as possible.”⁵⁹ Beekman and Callow add, “To do this effectively, the translator must understand both the meaning of the original text and the manner in which the target audience is likely to comprehend that meaning in the receptor language.”⁶⁰

The term “exegesis” itself comes from the Greek word *exegeomai* which basically meant “to lead out of.” In this process, one “reads out” of the text and finds an explanation. During everyday conversations or while reading any material, the participant makes interpretive decisions. Automatically questions are asked in the mind of the reader or listener, such as: What is the writer attempting to convey? Is the speaker telling a joke, reporting news, addressing a problem, trying to sell a product or giving a lecture? What is the purpose?

Biblical exegesis follows somewhat the same process, yet reading and understanding the Bible can be a much more complicated matter. With the various complexities that influenced the writings of the historical world, there are structures that must be taken into consideration. John Hayes and Carl Holladay in their book on biblical exegesis note several factors that for this review must be taken into consideration when the Bible is exegeted especially with congregational members.

For example:

1. None of the Bible was originally addressed to the modern reader and interpreter.
2. None of the Bible was originally composed in a modern language.

⁵⁹ H. M. Wolf, *When ‘Literal’ Is Not Accurate* (New York: International Bible Society, 1991): 127.

⁶⁰ J. Beekman and J. Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974): 22.

3. The modern readers of the Bible and the original readers of the texts are also separated by an enormous cultural gap.
4. The historical gap that separates the present from the world of the Bible ranges from almost twenty centuries to over three millennia.
5. The gradual growth of traditions and collective contributions to documents are clearly evident in the Bible, especially the Old Testament.
6. As with most documents from antiquity, the oldest manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments that were copies were made long after the original documents were written.⁶¹

What these examples show us is that textual studies in one form or another are indispensable for biblical exegesis.

Concluding Thoughts

The task of studying the Bible and coming to know God in an intimate way can seem daunting. And yet, the seeker of today has a chance to learn from the work of those biblical scholars who down through the ages dedicated their lives to careful and thorough exegesis. Their work offers authentic and reliable sources for the process of exegesis today. Through the years, these scholars have developed proper tools, methods and resources that are available today for the study of biblical exegesis and interpretation for everyday life.

Various approaches and types of criticism have been developed as procedures to better understand the text. Some of the more relevant criticism approaches are: textual

⁶¹ John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1987): 14-18.

criticism: the quest for the original wording; historical criticism: the setting in time and space, grammatical criticism: the language of the text; literary criticism: the composition and rhetorical style of the text; form criticism: the genre and life setting of the text; tradition criticism: the stages behind the text; redaction criticism: the final viewpoint and theology; structuralist criticism: the universals in the text; and finally, canonical criticism: the sacred text of synagogue and church – the believing community. And some of the more popular Bible study methods available are well defined by Robert West,⁶² Richard Warren,⁶³ and Kay Arthur.⁶⁴

Realizing that there is no one mechanical and perfect way to approach Bible study, for the *24 Hours with God* retreat, it is necessary to insist that the text speaks for itself by possessing its own autonomy, as the modern interpreter is able to listen first hand to the words of God.

In their handbook on exegesis, Hayes and Holladay affirm:

Rather than conceiving exegesis as the process through which the interpreter constructs a sort of collage of commentators' opinions, exegesis should be a more direct engagement between interpreter and text. By stressing the first-hand quality of the interpretive process, we want to underscore that autonomy of the interpreter. It is important for the beginning exegete to realize that the questions of a novice, even if they later turn out to be the wrong or ill-formulated questions, are nevertheless the questions a novice must ask. Only by asking the questions a text truly poses for the beginner will it be possible to develop skill in learning to interrogate a text. The beginning exegete should not be intimidated by the erudition of biblical commentaries and scholars, and in doing so allow them to set the agenda. Much is gained by reading a text for oneself, learning to formulate one's own questions and issues based on a careful reading of the text, and doing so with both independence and imagination.⁶⁵

⁶² Robert M. West, *How to Study the Bible* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2007).

⁶³ Richard Warren, and William A. Shell, *12 Dynamic Bible Study Methods* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987).

⁶⁴ Kay Arthur and David Arthur, with Pete De Lacey, *The New How to Study Your Bible: Discover the Life-Changing Approach to God's Word* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2010).

⁶⁵ Hayes and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*, 135.

The task of theology, as a specialized discipline, is to articulate the faith of a believing community for each new generation of believers. This task is for anyone who wishes to make a conscious effort to reflect on one's faith and give organized shape to these reflections. The above review attempts to bring to light contemporary contributions towards this process as competing worldviews are challenged by the relevance of theology.

From here while applying concepts from the previous chapters, and by embracing the exegetical discipleship model, in chapter four I will illustrate in more detail a retreat format that will be used for helping men and women to navigate the Scriptures as they apply God's Word to their daily life.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESIGN

As stated in the first chapter, this thesis-project arises from many years of ministry where I have had a growing concern about the biblical illiteracy of adults and the lack of awareness of God's presence in their daily lives. With the decreasing interest in studying the Bible and with the increasing demands placed on people's lives, I felt a concentrated learning opportunity could possibly be an answer. Yet, this could not be just any kind of learning opportunity. This learning opportunity would have to compete with the daily demands of a complex and busy American lifestyle, as well as compete with the many entertainment outlets available. The positive side of this challenge is that because the stress levels are so high and people are searching for better ways to fill their longing and loneliness, many are ready for a time away to find themselves and be at peace again.

Approximately six years ago, when I came to First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, I began a women's Bible study called *Discovering God*. From this group of approximately 150 women came the *24 Hours with God* retreats. I knew it was a long shot to entice this community of very busy and fulfilled group of women to spend a night with me to study the Bible and gain a fuller understanding of what it meant to have God in their lives, but it was my passion and desire. I knew from my own personal experience that time away from the demands of this world and time with God in the scriptures

changed my life for the better. And I knew it could change theirs too if they would only give it a chance. I also knew from my own personal experience that it didn't matter how much or how little they knew about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit or the Scriptures, there would always be a new depth for them to reach in understanding truths about God; for that is a journey that never ends.

That is why the *24 Hours with God* retreat was born. The creation of a venue for individuals to learn and experience God through a dynamic *24 Hours with God* process was intended to demonstrate that studying the Bible would change their lives. It would better their lives through their own study and understanding. Studying the Bible would bring a new richness and a sense of intrigue into their lives. Chapter one and chapter two of this thesis describe the biblical and theological framework that is the foundation of the retreats, as well as the emphases of biblical doctrine, systematic theology and spiritual formation principles that drive the content and organization of the retreats. The third chapter serves as a reminder as to the goal and importance of such a process. Emphasizing discipleship strategies and a framework for Bible study in the context of current literature brings home the focus of keeping it as simple and user friendly as possible. The purpose of the retreat is to set God's people on a life-long journey where they can discover God in the quiet of their own homes and hopefully, in turn, share the experience with others.

This chapter will outline step by step how an actual *24 Hours with God* retreat is developed, implemented and launched within the women's ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale. The format can also be used with men and couples, but for this thesis study, women will be the target group. As lined out in the next few pages,

much thought goes into what type of study and tools should be used to launch such retreats. The framing question underlining this thesis and the goal of moving toward a *24 Hour Retreat* format is always: *How can the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale become aware of God's presence in their daily lives by relying on the Bible?* This thesis will discuss briefly the retreat formats that have been experienced over the last few years and then in detail display the model and workbook that I believe works best.

Overview of the 24 Hours with God Retreats

Bearing in mind that there are several very effective methods and programs for studying the Scriptures as briefly mentioned in chapter three, the *24 Hours with God* focus is to create a simple and yet logical hands on approach so that the women can come to see for themselves the relevancy of God's truth for their lives.

Andrew Murray stated, "God is at this moment living and walking with us. Let us go to God with the honest purpose and surrender to know what he wants to be in us, and to have us be to him. By doing so, we will see into the face and very heart of God."¹

The various *24 Hour with God* retreats that were offered with this target group over the last few years were different in format, and yet had the same purpose in mind. Listed below are general descriptions of the various retreats which fall into two general categories: 1) Outreach Bible Study Retreats, with a resort location, and 2) Spiritual Formation and Bible Study Retreats, held at a retreat center. In the section following, I will give more details about the preplanning and the format, along with some samples of exercises, journaling and devotional activities.

¹ Andrew Murray, *Secrets of Authority* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2002): 208.

Outreach Resort Bible Study Retreats

Retreat Number One

Title: *The Power Behind God's Presence*

Scripture Text: "As for God, His way is perfect;
The Word of the Lord is proven." Psalm 18:30

Description: This retreat covered the Attributes of God, Creation, Miracles, The Trinity and more, using various stories from the Bible and systematic theology. Here I highlighted how God works with us as in the story of Jonah to carry out his work and is providentially in control over his creation. It was exciting for the women to realize that God had given them all spiritual gifts and by being empowered by the Spirit they could witness God's presence in their lives as they fulfill their calling.

Retreat Number Two

Title: *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*

Scripture Text: "Draw close to God and God will draw close to you." James 4:8

Description: Using a study guide and the Bible we explored who the Holy Spirit is and his relationship with us. We looked at what the Holy Spirit does for Christians when they are filled with the Spirit, and we discussed why sometimes we don't "feel" the Spirit or see his work in our lives. Small group activities helped to develop relationships and to expand the mind further. Learning about the six symbols of the Holy Spirit, which are the fruit of the Spirit, the wind, the dove, water, fire and oil was very interesting and provided meaningful new material.

Retreat Number Three

Title: *Celebrate*

Scripture Text: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”
Philippians 4:4

Description: The title and theme reflected a festive and joyful time with God and one another. This retreat had a community outreach focus, but also launched the new year into studying various New Testament letters. This retreat was unique because we studied the entire epistle of Philippians line-by-line using an exegetical workbook that I created. The 24 hours was broken into five sessions around celebrating Christ’s character, Christ’s love, Christ in the scriptures, confidence in Christ’s race, and in having the excellence of Christ’s peace.

Spiritual Formation Bible Study Retreats

Retreat Number Four

Title: *Discovering God in Angel’s*

Scripture Text: “Then I looked and heard the voice of many Angels, numbering thousands upon thousands...they encircled worshipping God.” Revelation 5:11-12

Description: This retreat studied in detail from the Old Testament to the New Testament stories and scriptural documentation on the role of angels and their purpose in God’s economy. The subject of evil and demonic power was also studied from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This was new for many of the women, but they were fascinated. Participants used a study guide for additional study, but primarily we used the stories in the scriptures and discussed them. Quiet time and journaling followed the evening activities. Study sheets were provided.

Retreat Number Five

Title: *Be Still and Know that I Am God*

Scripture Text: “Be still and know that I am God.” Psalm 46:10

Description: The title reflects a quiet relaxing and renewal emphasis. We explored what I referred to as triumphant thought patterns while applying spiritual formation exercises to engage the mind for drawing closer to God. This retreat was on a more personal level addressing individual questions. Before the retreat, I asked each participant to submit a topic of focus and as they would seek an answer from the Scriptures they would learn how to “live with the text” through prayer and journaling.

Retreat Number Six

Title: *Hear God's Voice: More clearly than ever before*

Scripture Text: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him.” Mark 9:7

Description: During this spiritual formation retreat, there were four sessions designed around listening to God: Listening for God's presence, in prayer, and in new ways, as well as listening for God's design in life and experiencing his love. Each session highlighted the point that God is present, but we need to develop a relationship and work at seeing God at work in our lives. Exercises on transformational listening through prayer were very helpful along with the discipline of journaling answers to a Scripture study which became the heart-shaping work of God's voice.

Planning the 24 Hours with God Retreat

Location and Facilities

As with any retreat, the location and facility will set the tone and shape the effectiveness of the spiritual experience. In Fort Lauderdale for the First Presbyterian Church congregation, the women prefer two locations. One location is on the beach at a beautiful resort only a few miles from the church. This is usually a fall retreat and is designed for launching a new church program year with excitement, as well as serve as outreach through encouraging the women to bring their friends. The lessons, activities and fellowship are carefully planned so that the event is appealing to those who might not normally attend church. That is the best reason for having a retreat on a beach or in a common area where all feel welcome and are in comfortable surroundings.

The other location is at a more modest destination. This retreat is usually held in the winter and has more of a spiritual formation emphasis along with a study of the Bible. It is comfortable, but is nothing like a resort. This location is a retreat center set in a beautiful wooded location only twenty minutes from the church. Though it is far from the monastic lifestyle that some may feel only serves best in a time of seeking God, it is about as basic as this community will accept, so for our purposes it is perfect. The grounds are fitted with a charming simple chapel for worship and inviting and inspiring places on the grounds for meditation. With only twenty-four hours to help women let go of their responsibilities and spend time with God, the somewhat familiar surroundings make it possible to jump in and begin time with God and one another.

Advertising and Themes

Advertising for the retreat usually begins 6 to 8 months before the event. Beautiful and inviting brochures and flyers are created, and announcements are made more than once during the words of welcome on Sunday. Much thought goes into selecting the retreat theme with a Scripture verse to match. Wording in the brochure and announcements are designed to reflect the mood of the retreat being advertised. There is an effort to project a professional and serious presentation which complements the importance of getting away with God. The tone set has much to do with enticing individuals to not only spend time away from the busy and entertaining lives that they lead, but also to show that studying God's Word can be fun, transforming and worth the money that they will be spending. Cost is important to the person who considers time away to study the Bible. It has to bring a unique kind of added value to an individual's life for them to leave their normal routine. This is also why the twenty-four hour format with only a one night stay is emphasized, for with such a brief time allotted, women are more likely to give it a chance.

One flyer that was created for the *Celebrate* retreat serves as an example of an invitation that not only gives the important information, but also sets the stage by displaying the mood and the tone of the event. It was printed on white, with red and blue accents. Streamers encased the border to create a celebration emphasis, and with, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Philippians 4:4, 13, as the Scripture text, there is energy and an uplifting mood from the very beginning. The wording and format of the invitation along with the reservation card is shown below:

Figure 1. Retreat Invitation

"Celebrate!"

*"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Philippians 4:4,13*

*It's time to study, relax and refresh at the beach...
Won't you escape with us and bring your Bible and a friend to the*

Women's Bible Study Retreat

*We will explore the entire letter of Philippians. By the time you leave, you will know
what it means to have the 'mind of Christ' which brings the joy and peace we all long for.*

*Lago Mar Resort and Club
1700 South Ocean Lane*

*Thursday ~ Friday
September 16 & 17, 2010
12:00 PM ~ 12:00 PM*

Led By: Rev. Connie Ast Caldwell

*\$85 per person ~ Double / \$148 per person ~ Single
[Meals are not included ~ Kitchenettes available in each Suite]*

*Make your Reservations now ~ Space is limited!
Fill out the response card and RSVP by August 12th
954.462.6200 Ext.205*

Lago Mar WBS "Celebrate!" Retreat Reservation Card

Name: _____

Phone/E-Mail: _____

_____ Single \$148

_____ Double \$85

Roommate: _____

[Double Occupancy only]

If you would like to sponsor a lady for the retreat, please contact Connie]

** Please list any special requests or needs*

** Space is limited, so RSVP early [by August 12th]*

** Please Note: No refunds available*

*Complete form and return to
401 SE 15th Ave Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33301
Please enclose payment made payable to First Presbyterian Church*

The Retreat Committee

Early in the planning stages it is important for a retreat committee to be formed, not only to handle the logistics, but also to pray for the participants before and during the retreat. The committee serves as a hospitality crew and is a “best” friend for any woman who needs friendship on that retreat. One of the things I enjoy is delegating responsibility to as many women as I can. It is so rewarding to work as a team. The retreat committee has women who help with worship and communion, decorate the rooms, make cakes and cookies, send note cards, make phone calls, work the welcome and information tables, and organize games or other activities. All of this adds to the fun and is a great way for the women to develop a bond with one another.

Introductory Packets

Prior to each retreat, packets with an introductory letter and other information are sent to the homes of the participants. Each packet would contain instructions such as directions with maps, retreat attire, and what to bring such as Bibles and a gift for a missions project. Often we would have an activity that would require the women to bring items for creating crafts. This is one more way of helping the participant to prepare for her time away, feel comfortable and hopefully get excited.

An agenda is sent with this letter as well. The reason for the agenda to be sent ahead of time is so that the participants can know what to expect when they arrive. I have found that many people experience anxiety when invited to attend a retreat. Spiritual retreats especially tend to make people feel uneasy. When a person hears that they will be studying the Bible, there has to be an element of trust. Trust in the teacher would be best, but most often if invited by a friend, a person attends the retreat

on their friend's credibility. Preparing the participants with information in advance about what to expect helps to ease any anxiety and to build their trust in the teacher and the process.

Letter: Continuing to Set the Tone of the Retreat

Figure 2. Retreat Letter

Hello Ladies,

We are so happy that you are going to join us at the Women's Bible Study "Celebrate!" Retreat on September 16th and 17th. This will be a time to 'Rejoice in the Lord.' During this two day journey at Lago Mar Resort, we will help you relax and refresh. By the time you leave, you will know what it means to have the 'mind of Christ' which brings the joy and peace we all long for.

While exploring the entire letter of the Philippians, please keep in mind a few items that you will want to bring with you. See the list below for ideas.

- *Bible and paper*
- *Comfortable clothing and shoes (Pool and beachwear, if you wish)*
- *Snacks and or beverages for yourself or to share [kitchenettes available in rooms]*
- *One snack or special treat to share in the Hospitality Room*

Directions:

*Lago Mar Resort and Club
1700 South Ocean Lane
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida 33316
[954] 523-6511*

See enclosed direction sheet and map.

For carpooling information, contact the church office

For more information about Lago Mar Resort, visit www.LagoMar.com

We look forward to a wonderful time together!

Yours in Christ,

*Rev. Connie Caldwell
and the Retreat Planning Committee*

Retreat Agenda

The agenda does not allow a great deal of time in which women would be alone without structure, especially in the outreach retreat. This is so that a new person won't feel alone or left out. In the spiritual formation retreat there is more quiet time, but again it is structured. The workbooks have far more assignments than anyone can do in a twenty-four hour period, but at least there is an assignment for directed study.

Figure 3. Retreat Agenda

<u>24 Hours with God ~ "Celebrate!"</u>	
<i>Women's Bible Study Retreat ~ LagoMar Resort</i>	
<u>Retreat Agenda</u>	
<u>Thursday, September 16, 2010</u>	
12:00~1:00 PM	Meet and Mingle [Around Pool]
1:00~2:00 PM	Session I~Celebrating: The Privilege of Christ's Character
2:00~3:00 PM	Session II~Celebrating: The Attitude of Christ's Love
3:00~3:45 PM	Small Groups
4:00~5:00 PM	Check In
5:00~5:30 PM	Load Transportation
5:30~7:30 PM	Dinner
7:30~8:00 PM	Free Time
8:00~9:00 PM	Session III~Celebrating: The Presence of Christ in Scripture
9:00~	Beach Time, Social Hour and Rest
<u>Friday, September 17, 2010</u>	
8:00~8:30 AM	Breakfast [On Own]
8:30~9:30 AM	Session IV~Celebrating: The Confidence of Christ's Race
9:30~10:30 AM	Session V~Celebrating: The Excellence of Christ's Peace
10:30~11:00 AM	Checkout of Room
11:00~12:00 PM	Worship, Communion and Closing
12:00~	Free Time, Lunch, and Beach Time

Implementing the Retreat

On the actual day of the retreat, much organization has taken place hours before the women arrive. At check-in they receive their retreat binder which has been carefully prepared with a workbook for the sessions as well as other important material. The retreat committee has the rooms ready to go with keys, roommate assignments, maps and welcome packets. Hospitality baskets are placed in each one of the rooms with a journal, maybe a mug with the retreat theme printed on it, a custom book mark, name tag and snack food. There is a list of all the women who will be on the retreat so that immediately they can feel part of the group. And after they unload their things and mingle a little bit, the women are encouraged to settle into a quiet time before the first session begins, for they have an assignment.

They will be asked to read the letter below entitled, *A Message from Connie*. This letter is to once again set the tone for the retreat and begin the process of renewal by setting the stage for a time with God. This letter also helps the person who is a little apprehensive and maybe even alone to feel my presence and a connectedness with the others on the retreat. At this point what I am trying to achieve is a feeling of validation. I want this participant to feel that they are in the presence of God and that they can relax and expect a wonderful experience.

Below is a message for the *Celebrate* outreach retreat and following is an example of a spiritual formation retreat message *Hearing God's Voice: more clearly than ever before*. Each letter is written differently to prepare the participant for the next *24 Hours with God*. The one thing they have in common is that they are written from the perspective of the need for renewal which is built into each of us by God. Jesus withdrew

to quiet places for time alone with the Lord, and so should we. It doesn't matter if we are in a quiet shelter tucked away in a beautiful hotel room on a beach or are in a more cottage-like room nestled in the woods. If we will take the time and make the effort, God will meet us. We will be renewed and a relationship will be nurtured because we have honored God by setting aside all other things in our lives and have given total dedication to his Word.

Figure 4. A Message from Connie – Outreach Retreat

Welcome to our second annual 24 Hours with God retreat at Lago Mar! I am so glad to be with you. This resort is so beautiful! Last year I must share that I felt a little guilty when they assigned us our rooms, for when I opened the door and walked in, I thought, wow - this is hardly suffering for Christ, or practicing the monastic life style (which some feel is the only way to go on a retreat). But then I thought ...what am I thinking? I am in beautiful South Florida!

God brought us here, so why should we deprive ourselves of His wonderful creation? As a matter of fact God would desire for us to study His Word in His beautiful creation, because we will probably be able to hear Him better. We can celebrate that! OK, I guess we don't have to be at such a beautiful resort, and yes, we should give thanks to the privilege of being at Lago Mar. But then, just maybe, this will be the beginning of spending beautiful, quality time with God in creation every day.

Over the next 24 hours, we are going to be reminded through the words of Paul how to develop and live out a vibrant faith by exploring what we believe. We are going to learn the secret to his undying peace and contentment and realize with a passionate intensity—that Paul is in love. By the time you leave, I hope you too will be passionately in love. Or at least have a renewed love. This would be a love with Jesus Christ.

Experiencing Christ is the only way to live and yet so many people deprive themselves of the number one relationship that can offer power and passion for living. We are going to spend an intentional amount of time thinking about these things. We will explore Scripture texts that will bring truths alive that will be thought provoking and downright practical. The letter to the Philippians church is undoubtedly Paul's best. I look forward to studying with you.

Connie

Figure 5. A Message from Connie – Spiritual Formation Retreat

Congratulations for making the decision to spend 24 hours with God! On this retreat I am excited to say that in God's presence, we will be sharing many experiences together. Careful planning has taken place so that every one of us should feel closer to God and with heartfelt dedication, we might even hear his voice. Listening to God is at the heart of the Gospel message. And studying the Gospel message is what we are all about! God the father said to Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7). And so that is what we are going to do. But note, to listen means not just hear, but to give heed to and obey God as we pay attention to the circumstances in our lives.

Transformational listening will be the concept behind listening to God which will literally transform our lives. Jesus told his disciples though, that the key will be "How we pay attention" (Luke 8:18). Long before Jesus spoke these words, Moses told the people of God, "...love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him" (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

Jesus said that his followers are like sheep, and he is like a shepherd (John 10:14). He said that sheep listen to the voice of the shepherd and not to a stranger, implying that we will follow him because we know his voice (John 10:3-5). But recognizing the voice of Jesus comes over time. It is learned through experience from an intimate relationship.

Unless we know how to distinguish the voice of Jesus from the voices of this world, we will not be able to respond to Jesus' leading. Part of what we need to learn on our spiritual journey is how to pay attention to the leading of his Spirit.

This weekend we will spend twenty-four hours exploring what it means to hear God's voice more clearly than ever before. We will explore Scripture texts that will bring truths alive for us and we will break into groups and discover God through our community. We will learn about prayer and how to communicate with God, and we will learn about the things that block our communication.

By the time you leave here, it is my hope that you will learn new truths and techniques that will cause the process of spiritual formation to begin so that experiencing the encounter of God will be with you forever! Now before we all gather for our first activity, find a place where you can be alone and pray with expectancy...genuinely open yourself to the heart-shaping work of God.

I look forward to our time together –

Connie

Example Exercises for Applying Spiritual Formation Disciplines

As the retreat sessions begin, the participants will follow along in their workbooks which are created specifically for each individual retreat. Each workbook has material that introduces or outlines the sessions as well as material for the participants to complete during the sessions or in small groups afterwards. In some of the retreats there may be additional material for meditation or Bible study alone or with a roommate or friend. Below are examples of this material from various retreats. The complete workbook for the *Celebrate* retreat follows the conclusion of this chapter.

The Way of Spiritual Formation

The following was used during a session of the *Celebrate* retreat with the purpose of emphasizing the importance of scripture in spiritual formation. Definitions and explanations were especially important for the retreat participants new to Bible study. Some of this material was meant to be completed later by the participants.²

A definition of Spiritual Formation from Robert Mulholland's work is, "*Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the gracious working of God's spirit, for the transformation of the world.*"³

1. *The process*: a gradual, life-long movement, not single, momentous conversion
2. *of being conformed to the image of Christ*: the image of Christ is pattern of human wholeness.

² The following spiritual formation exercises and disciplines were taught during a retreat session by Elder and Teacher Rosalind Davis and Rev. Connie Caldwell of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale.

³ Taken from: *Free Download*, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, www.thefellowship.info. Cited as: This definition adapts and expands Robert Mulholland's work, *Invitation to a Journey* (Colorado Springs, CO: InterVarsity Press, 1993). Companions in Christ Training © 2004.

3. *by the gracious working of God's spirit*: we want to make things happen in our self-reliant culture but cannot conform ourselves to Christ by own will power.

4. *for the transformation of the world*: transformed persons are leaven for transforming the world.

Thoughts from other writers and biblical teachers:

John Ortberg:

There is an outer you—your body—that is being shaped all the time by the way you eat, drink, sleep, exercise, and live. You may do this well or poorly, intentionally or not, but it *will* happen. Then there is an inner you – your thoughts, desires, will, and character. This is being shaped all the time by what you see, read, hear, think, and do. We can call this inner you the spirit.

Spiritual Formation is the process by which your inner self and character are shaped. People sometimes speak as if spiritual formation is an optional activity that some religious people may pursue and others bypass. They think it is reserved for monks, mystics, and missionaries. But that's not true. We flourish when our spirits are rooted in and shaped by the Spirit of God....⁴

Jeffrey P. Greenman:

Spiritual formation is our continuing response to the reality of God's grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world.⁵

John Mogabgab:

Having carefully and lovingly formed each of us in the womb, God knows us by name and will not forget us (see Isaiah 43:1:44:21, 24). In Biblical perspective, to be a person means to exist in a relationship of ongoing spiritual formation with the God whose interest in us extends to the very roots of our being.⁶

⁴ John Ortberg, *The Me I Want to Be: Becoming God's Best Version of You* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2010): 29.

⁵ Jeffrey Greenman, *Life in the Spirit, Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009): 24.

⁶ John Mogabgab, "What is Spiritual Formation," in *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1992): x-xi.

Spiritual Formation in Paul's Letters

2 Corinthians 3(TNIV)¹⁸*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Romans 12 (TNIV) *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

In Philippians

Key Verse: Philippians 1(TNIV) ⁶*being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

- 1:9-11
- 2:5
- 2:12-13, 15a
- 3:7-9
- 3:12
- 3:15-16
- 4:4-9

Spiritual Formation through the Presence of Christ in Scripture

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Colossians 3

- Informational Reading
- Formational Reading
- *Lectio Divina –Reading the Divine*
- Reading Scripture Devotionally and Conversationally

Entering a Story from Scripture—A Good Activity for Journaling

- Try to see yourself in the story.
- Imagine the setting, even the sounds and smells.
- Try to see yourself as one or more of the characters.
 - How do you feel? What would you have done?
 - What is God teaching you, or asking you through the story?
 - Converse with Him, praying, thanking, repenting, all through the experience.

Spiritual Formation through Praying the Scriptures

The following was used as a closing for a session of an outreach Bible study retreat:⁷

From *Prayer—Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster⁸

“Coming Home: An Invitation to Prayer”

Reading #1 God is inviting you—and me—to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in. For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.

We do not need to be shy. He invites us into:

- The living room of his heart, where we can relax and share freely.
- The dining room of his strength, where we can feast to heart's delight.
- The study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch—and ask all the questions we want.
- The workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, as he works through us to bring about his purposes.
- Into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found, where we can be naked, vulnerable and free—the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest.

Reflection Questions

Can you visualize yourself in one or more of the rooms?

Would you like to move to a room you have not yet experienced?

Reading #2 How good of God to provide us a way into his heart. He knows that we are stiff-necked and hard hearted, so he has provided a means of entrance.

⁷ This session was also prepared and led by Elder and Teacher Rosalind Davis, First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, FL.

⁸ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer, Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishing, 1992): 1-4.

Jesus, the Christ, lived a perfect life, died in our place, and rose victorious over all the dark powers so that we might live through him.

This is wonderful news: No longer do we have to stand outside, barred from nearness to God by our rebellion.

We may now enter through the door of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ. And when we do, we can experience a love relationship: an enduring, continuing, growing love relationship with the great God of the universe.

The key to this home and the heart of God, is found through prayer.⁹

Reading #3 Perhaps you have never prayed before except in anguish or terror—never mind.

The Father's heart is open wide and you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you have tried to pray and were disappointed and disillusioned. You seem to have little faith, or none. It does not matter.

The Father's heart is open wide and you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you are bruised and broken by the pressures of life. Others have wronged you, you have painful memories that have never been healed, you avoid prayer because you feel too distant, too unworthy, or too defiled. Don't despair.

The Father's heart is open wide and you are welcome to come in.

Perhaps you have prayed for many years, but the words have grown brittle and cold. Little ever happens anymore and God seems remote and inaccessible. Listen.

The Father's heart is open wide and you are welcome to come in.

Reflection Questions:

Do you relate to any of the statements of disappointment in prayer?

Write a prayer being honest and open with God about any disappointments and then thank him for his open arms to receive you as you are and for providing the door and the key to his heart.

⁹ Foster, *Prayer*, 2-3.

Spiritual Formation through Meditation and Listening

I created the following exercises to be given to participants during a spiritual formation/Bible study retreat for Bible meditation in their rooms after the last session.

Reflection Exercise (by yourself)

Read slowly this verse:

Listening for God's Presence

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,
In a dry and weary land
Where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1)

What thoughts came to mind as you read this Psalm?

Write the Psalm in your own words.

Write a prayer to God in response to how you will respond to this verse.

Reflection Exercise (with your roommate)

Listening for God's Love

Spend some time thinking and maybe journaling about how you experience the truth of the following verses in your own life:

You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb...I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:13,14).

Reflection Exercise (by yourself)

Listening for God's Presence

Read slowly this verse: O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you,
In a dry and weary land
Where there is no water. (Psalm 63:1)

What thoughts came to mind as you read this Psalm?

Write the Psalm in your own words.

Write a prayer to God in response to how you will respond to this verse.

Reflection Exercise (with your roommate) Listening for God's Love

Spend some time thinking and maybe journaling about how you experience the truth of the following verses in your own life:

“You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb...I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:13,14).

Discuss these questions: How does knowing that God made me; remind me that he loves me?

What difference does it make to me to know that God knew me before I was born?

Share your answer: Do I think that I am “wonderfully made”?

Try to explain why or why not. Consider praying together...deciding who will begin the prayer and who will end. As you end your prayer, picture Jesus saying to you, “Go in Peace and be freed from your suffering.”

If you are not comfortable praying, just talk through what you would like for God to know...then read to yourself, “*Go in Peace and be freed from your suffering.*”

Your presence with the other person represents the presence of the Holy Spirit. God is listening. God will provide. God will help. God will heal. Listen quietly, thoughtfully, and with acceptance and love. When we listen in this way, just think - we are standing with one another on holy ground.

Spiritual Formation through Journaling

The following article, which I have used in both outreach and spiritual formation retreats, explains the many benefits of journaling and gives practical guidelines for keeping a spiritual journey as part of Bible study and spiritual formation.

You're Invited to Begin ...the Journey of Journaling

Clean pages await you, open to the possibilities that might develop. Even if you have never journaled before, you're invited to begin. All of us carry on inner conversations as we sort through our feelings about daily living, our relationships, and world events. We talk to God about our experience of life. Journaling is the process of writing down those talks between ourselves and God so that what we are thinking and feeling becomes tangible on paper.

Journaling provides us with a means of reflection. We are gifted with the time and space to open ourselves to God. Journaling is a private discipline in which we can reveal ourselves totally. We need not consider our words carefully or wonder what other people might think of our thoughts. Journal writing is a sharing between our true selves and God. In journaling, we know ourselves as we really are and feel the acceptance of the One who loves us no matter what.

There are many different approaches to journaling. You may want to experiment with a variety of methods to see in which ways you best understand yourself and your relationship to God. All you need is a book, a pen and or pencil, and a desire to come closer to God in the writing.

Most people find a regular discipline of journaling easiest if they choose a specific portion of the day to spend time with the journal. Perhaps you will journal in the quiet of early morning. You may find that journaling just before bedtime helps you “take your rest in peace.” If you wake in the night and find it hard to go back to sleep, journaling might be most fruitful in the wee hours of the morning. Maybe you can find a lull or make space in the middle of the day to settle into journaling. The time is less important than the regularity of your journaling.

Some places make it easier to focus on the journaling process. Do you have a favorite chair in the living room? Is there a room at work where you can find privacy? Do you best focus on God in the beauty of your backyard? Experiment until you find the place that lends itself to the discipline of journaling.

Once you have chosen a time and place, take a few moments to relax and prepare yourself for God’s spirit to work within you in this time of journaling. Breathe deeply. Pray that the time may be fruitful and that you may know God more fully in your writing. You will find your own practices for clearing your mind of other things so that you are ready to give full attention to God, who can speak to you in your writing.

If distractions come, keep a piece of scratch paper nearby so that you can jot down a word that will remind you of that distraction, then deal with it later. Items for the grocery list, necessary phone calls, and projects due can be put aside during your journaling time.

Once you are ready to put pen to paper and feel centered, what do you write? You will find your own style of journaling but here are some possible ways to start:

- Focus on a Scripture passage. What might God be saying to you in this passage? The Bible, in its rich variety, tells of other individuals in other times that were transformed by God’s power working in their lives.

- What can you learn from their experience? How do you draw closer to the God of past, present, and future through the lives of Noah or Deborah, Jeremiah or Elizabeth? In what ways can the Bible come alive for you so that you feel the presence of the living God?
- What is going on in your life? Which experiences have affected your soul in a particular way? God most often meets us in the ordinary details of our lives. Do you recognize Christ in your tucking the kids in at night? Sitting and having a cup of coffee with your spouse? Sharing with a friend how God “did something” to show that he cares? How does your faith affect decisions made at work or how you relate to your family? Journaling the events of your life can help you see God in all of life.
- The journal can be a place to record your prayers, joys, concerns, fears, and questions that you share with God alone. Reread these entries, you may see that the hand of God was indeed moving and prayers were being answered in surprising but appropriate ways. A prayer journal can keep you connected to God.
- Journaling is a good companion to other spiritual disciplines, such as Bible study, fasting, prayer, meditational walks. Particular worship services, workshops, study groups may spark the need to write. Something you read or hear in a conversation may send you with pen in hand to your special journaling place.
- Record dreams, daydreams, ideas for short stories or poems. A disciplined time and place for journaling and free journaling throughout the day is an opening in God’s creative spirit to flow through Christ to you.

You will find your way to connect with God. Journaling is only one of those ways. Whether it becomes a log of your spiritual journey, a point of dialogue with God, or the arena for working through questions of faith, the regular practice of writing will bring you closer to God.

Some days it may feel difficult or impossible to write. Other days, you may look eagerly forward to the time to journal. Accept the natural rhythms of your life to record God speaking anew each day.

May God Bless You Richly With His Words.

Worship - the Conclusion of the 24 Hours with God Retreat

This is a very important time for closure, renewal, and for God to speak to the women in a very special way. Some of the women are assigned parts in the service. Structure much like a traditional Presbyterian service is used. Depending on the size, we will sometimes gather in a circle. During the time of communion, the ladies write on a piece of paper a pledge to God, then one by one come forward placing their self-offering in the basket. Then communion follows by intinction. Before each woman returns to her seat, she can go to one of the four prayer stations and receive prayer from one of the women on the worship team. At the conclusion of the service, we sing a hymn, and then I offer the benediction with some final words before we go our separate ways.

Figure 6. An Example of a Worship Service

ASSEMBLE IN GOD'S NAME

Call to Worship (please stand in a circle)

Leader: Our joy is in the Name of the Lord, who made the heaven and earth.

People: *God is at work in our lives. He hears us as we speak. We present ourselves as we discern His mission and His will.*

Leader: Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Not only in things of the church, but for the community God has given us.

People: *We seek what is good and acceptable in God's sight so let us rejoice as we sing His praise.*

Hymn #464

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

Psalm 145:10

Call to Confession

Leader: We have come to meet God and to be shaped into who God needs us to be as we claim his eternal love. Let us open our hearts and pray together...

All: Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

Declaration of Forgiveness

1 John 1:9

Thanksgiving Prayer (Unison)

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, for we thank you for the assurance of your forgiveness! Grant that the mission of Christ in the world may be fully accomplished through your church. Inspire us as your servants to discover windows in different places through which the light of the gospel may shine. May we be faithful to your Word as reach for unity and peace. This is our prayer. Amen.

Scripture Text

Message from God's Holy Word

Invitation to the Lord's Table

Words of Institution - Self-offering

Communion by Intinction

During the time for communion, we will ask that you come up to the table, place your self-offering in the basket, then take the bread and dip it in the juice. After taking the communion, please join each other in the circle while we wait for each other and then we will close with the Lord's Prayer.

Lord's Prayer (in unison)

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Hymn #324

Open My Eyes That I May See

Psalm 119:18

Closing Benediction

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: *And also with you.*

Leader: Go in peace remembering God's love and glorify Him in all you do!

GO IN GOD'S NAME

Exegesis Workbook for *Celebrate Outreach* and Bible Study Retreat

Before moving into chapter five, I have enclosed an example of the *Celebrate* retreat exegesis workbook. It is, in my opinion, the best way to initiate the Exegetical Discipleship Model and assure confidence in the reader of God's presence, as discussed at length in chapter three. Following an introduction, using illustrations from motivational writer Stephen Covey's *Everyday Greatness*,¹⁰ the workbook lays out the line-by-line Bible study of the book of Philippians. Included is commentary for careful exegesis along with material meant to guide the women in the process of discovering relevant and practical applications for their lives today.

This chapter has sought to outline step by step how an actual plan of the *24 Hours with God* retreat can be an answer to the growing concern of biblical illiteracy in America and the crisis facing the church. With many years of actual retreats experienced by the women of First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, rather clear assessments have been observed and will be discussed in the next chapter as outcomes, conclusions and recommendations.

¹⁰ Stephen Covey, *Everyday Greatness: Inspiration for a Meaningful Life* (Nashville, TN: Raleigh Hill Press, 2006): viii-xv.

Figure 7. Retreat Workbook

The Epistle of the Apostle Paul

Philippians

Prepared by Rev. Connie Ast Caldwell

Words of Introduction

We need to record our blessings – Paul recorded only just a few of his in a letter to the believers in Philippi – and one of the BEST blessings is Jesus Christ!

Over the next twenty-four hours we will not only go back into history to one of the greatest events in all times for the Apostle Paul and the church, but we are going to explore our own approach to life.

I would like to suggest that we need to approach life with the belief that our most important work is always ahead of us and not behind us. As expressed by Stephen Covey in what he calls his “personal motto,” we need to “Live life in a ‘crescendo.’”¹¹

Reflect on how an orchestra builds momentum in a concert with its various instruments to a strong and full sound that makes you sit on the edge of your seat? We need to think about our lives that way.

When we seek to advance in life like a crescendo, we move from where we are to even a better place, hopefully fulfilling what you were born to do. This is a calling and a journey of greatness, and if done for our Lord, it is a higher honor than any other.

¹¹ Covey, *Everyday Greatness*, viii.

Stephen Covey suggests that this way of life will involve these three choices every day.

1. The Choice to Act: *Will we act upon life, or will we merely be acted upon?*
2. The Choice of Purpose: *To what ends, or purposes, will our daily choices lead?*
3. The Choice for Principles: *Will we live our lives in accordance with proven principles, or will we suffer the consequences of not doing so?*¹²

Sea Captain Illustration

We have an authority and a guide to help us navigate the waters of our lives, but we have the choice to follow the markers or to go our own way. I love this story about following the right course:

One foggy night at sea the captain of a ship saw what looked like the lights of another ship heading toward him. He had his signalman contact the other ship by light. The message was: "Change your course ten degrees to the south." The reply came back: "Change your course ten degrees to the north."

Then the captain answered: "I am a captain, so you change your course ten degrees to the south."

Reply: "I am a seaman first class – change your course ten degrees to the north"

This last exchange really infuriated the captain, so he signaled back: "I am a battleship – change your course ten degrees to the south."

*Reply: "And I am a lighthouse. Change your course ten degrees to the north!"*¹³

You see, the light-house was not going to change its course. It was permanent, fixed. Only the captain had the choice of whether or not to follow its guidance. The lighthouse is like a principle. Principles are immovable; they are timeless and universal. They do not change.

¹² Covey, *Everyday Greatness*, x.

¹³ Covey, *Everyday Greatness*, xv.

And this is also true of the principles lined out in God's holy Word as well. Like the lighthouse, principles provide permanent markers against which people can set their direction with the help of the Holy Spirit to guide us. We will be able to see through anything if we have this light to guide our way.

So let's begin by exploring the life of Paul and at the same time, let's see - while we have a lot of fun – what we can discover together.

Philippians

Introduction Outline

- 1. The City and Its People [refer to map]**
- 2. The Founding of the Church**
- 3. The Occasion for the Epistle/letter**
- 4. The Authorship and his background**
- 5. The Origin and the Date**
- 6. Paul's Opponents at Philippi**
- 7. The Theological Structure of the Epistle**

Timeline

Chapter One

Session I Celebrating: The Privilege of Christ's Character

I. Salutation (1:1-2)

[1] **Paul** and **Timothy**, {Acts 16:1} **servants** of Christ Jesus, to all the **saints** in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers [bishops] and deacons: [2] **Grace** and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Writers

(1)

(2)

The Readers

(1)

(2)

The Greeting

Hebrew Greeting: "Peace be with you..."

Paul's Greeting: "Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Why does Paul put Grace first? 1 Timothy 1: 12-17 to hear his testimony.

We are going to look at how God took a well meaning Jew who knew the Jewish Bible and converted him to a follower of Jesus Christ and then launched him into his calling for life! And then we are going to explore together how this impacted Paul.

Key Players in the Conversion Story Acts 7:54-9:31 Paul Leaves his former life behind

- Stephen was a powerful witness for our Lord and first martyred.
- Saul, a Pharisee who killed followers of Christ for it was a threat to Judaism.
- Paul, the new Christian who listened to God and followed Christ's teachings.
- The Apostles, who rejected Paul because they didn't trust him.
- Barnabas, the encourager and maybe the most important player at the time.

II. Explanation of Paul's Relationship with the Believers of Philippi (1:3-2:30)

³ I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray {Rom 1:10} with joy ⁵ because of your **partnership** {Acts 2:42; } in the gospel from the first day {16:12-40} until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who **began a good work in you** will carry it on to **completion** until the day of Christ Jesus. ⁷ It is right {2 Peter 1:13} for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in **my heart**; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, **all of you** share in God's **grace** with me. ⁸ God can testify {Rom 1:9} how **I long** for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. ⁹ And this is my prayer: that your **love** {1 Thes 3:12} may **abound more** and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, {1 Cor 1:8} [11] **filled with the fruit of righteousness** that comes through Jesus Christ – to the **glory** and praise of God.

1. Paul's Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Philippians

(1) Paul's Thanksgiving

Three reasons Paul was thankful for the Philippians:

One Partnership

Two Growing in their faith

Three All have been saved

(2) Paul's Prayer

Why did Paul have confidence in God's power and activity?

He experienced the Miracles of God.

Read the Paul and Silas story in Acts 16:16-40.

Paul easily moved between the tensions of human activity and divine activity because he knew that God worked through human beings and circumstances to carry out his will.

(3) Paul's Love

"Agape" Love

How do you grow *agape* love?

1. Knowledge – Experiential [intellectual] verses Knowing [God puts it in us]
2. Growing love – Discerning wisdom

Justification

Sanctification

Glorification

How are we to live with one another?

V 11 “filled with the fruit of righteousness” is a term which implies character. Discerning what is best grows character.

Definitions:

(1) Pure

(2) Blameless

The nature of complete character

The purpose of complete character

2. Paul’s Joy in the Progress of the Gospel

(1) Paul’s Circumstances

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers [& sisters], that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the **whole palace guard** [or whole palace] and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. ¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that **I am put here for the defense of the gospel**. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

“whole palace guard” =

Divine Perspective: Cost of Discipleship

(2) Paul's Attitude

¹⁸ But what does it matter? The **important thing is** that in every way, whether from false motives or true, **Christ is preached**. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers {2 Co 1:11} and **the help** given by the **Spirit of Jesus Christ**, what has happened to me **will turn out** for my **deliverance**. [be set free] ²⁰ I eagerly expect {Rom 8:19} and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have **sufficient courage** so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

²¹ **For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.** ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? **I do not know!** ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and {2 Tim 4:6} be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, **I know that I will remain**, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

Divine Purpose: Prayed with expectancy – Hope was in Christ – Trusted

- Most important thing is Christ be known
- The help to make Christ known comes from the Holy Spirit
- Paul is sure from past experience that he will be set free
- He just hopes that he continues to hang in there with courage

What does Paul mean when he says, “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain?”
Would you have the courage to say that? Do you say that now?

Chapter Two

Session II Celebrating: The Attitude of Christ's Love

I. Instructions for Christ-like Character

(1) A Unified Stand

²⁷ Whatever happens, **conduct yourselves in a manner worthy** {Eph 4:1} of the Gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you **stand firm in one spirit**, contending as one man [person] for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being **frightened** in any way by those who oppose you.

This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God. ²⁹ for it has been granted to you {Matthew 5:11,12} **on behalf of Christ** not only to believe on him, but also to **suffer for him**, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle {1 Th 2:2} you saw {Act 16:19-40} I had, and now hear that I still have.

The Nature of Standing for Christ

- Stand Firm
- In One Spirit
- This is a Sign
- To suffer for Christ

Paul had to develop a theology of suffering. He did so without becoming calloused to human need. You see, Paul understood that suffering came from the sin of the world not God and we live in the world (for now) and so should expect suffering.

Theology is:

Develop/work at/come up with how it all comes together. God doesn't just lay it in our laps. We have to experientially come to work our inner and outer knowledge together like a puzzle to see the picture.

Divine Gift of Knowing: because we are united in the power of Christ. That is how we can be **OPTIMISTIC! THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING!**

(2) A Unified Mind

¹ If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, {2 Cor 13:14} if any tenderness and compassion, ² {Col 3:12} then **make my joy complete** {John 3:29} by being **like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.** ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, {Gal 5:26} but in **humility** consider others better than yourselves. {Rom 12:10} ⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

An expression of unity is measured by three factors. These factors show that God is working in and through his people:

- **The first factor for measurement is to “be like minded.”** This comes from the inner core of one’s being and beliefs. There is nothing superficial about it. You can know if this first measurement is being met when you are misunderstood yet people don’t gossip behind your back. Instead they try to understand you, forgive you with out reducing you to a shunned level.
- **The second factor for measurement-- is there evidence of humility?** Humility is putting aside one’s own agenda for God’s. Henri Nouwen says that we “empty” ourselves like a container full of liquid so that it can be filled up by God’s Spirit and thus carry out his will by the renewing of our mind. This reduces us to *nothingness*.

Christian humility has 4 basic elements that must be realized:

1. God has gifted us to serve his economy in some way.
2. God will enable us to do what we need to do.
3. God did not give us every gift and so we must work with others.
4. God oversees how we use our gifts for his kingdom.

One thing is for sure, if we step out on our own will and try to “make things” happen; and God isn’t behind it, we will not be successful for at least in God’s eyes.

- **The third factor for measurement is the consideration given to others.** The Philippians were to “look out” for others interests as well as their own. We are to look at how God works through others and celebrate their gifts and achievements.

Christ did not only focus on whether we were spiritually attractive; he focused on what God saw attractive in us and died for that!

(3) The Example of Christ

[5] Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: {Matthew 11:29}

[6] Who, being in very nature (or in the form of) God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

[7] but made himself nothing, taking the very nature (or the form of) a servant, being made in human likeness. {John 1:14}.

[8] And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death {Matthew 26:39; Heb 5:8}, - even death on a cross!

[9] Therefore God exalted him {Ac 2:23; Heb 2:9} to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, {Eph 1:20, 21},

[10] that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

[11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, {John 13:13} to the glory of God the Father.

(4) The Attitude of Obedience Shining as Stars

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is **God who works in you** to will and to **act according to his** good purpose. ¹⁴ Do everything **without complaining or arguing**, ¹⁵ so that you may become **blameless and pure**, children of God {Matthew 5:45, 48; Eph 5:1} without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you **shine like stars** in the universe ¹⁶ as you hold out the word of life – in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. ¹⁷ But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering {2 Tim 4:6} on the sacrifice {Rom 15:16} and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

The Instruction to the People of God

Shine like Stars: When God lives at the center of our lives, we can shine like stars! Through the sanctification process, we are brought into the mind of Christ. We become a light in the darkness. Not by anything we do, but because Christ lives in us.

Work out Your Salvation: To have this kind of “glow” if you will, a believer must “continue to work out their salvation.” They are to devote themselves to practical Christianity, be known for positive steadfastness and participate in the joy like Paul describes.

No Complaining and Arguing is Allowed: It is a sin and blocks the flow of God’s Spirit in our lives. When we want to complain or be critical we need to stop and pray right where we are and give it to God. We do not want to block the positive flow of God’s Spirit. We only short change ourselves and hurt others.

To obey is to hear: We are to hear God’s voice. We are to listen to him by being disciplined enough to rearrange our circumstances when we can so that we can have peace. The Divine Initiative requires a response which is considered Stewardship.

Accept the Responsibility: Mature in the faith. *Grow up* Paul says. We were chosen to be God’s showcase and we need to accept that responsibility. Paul did not accept passive Christianity. We are to “make” Christianity so attractive in a unified way that it draws others to him.

Stand True: Walk the walk if you are going to talk the talk. God is counting on us to be there for him. To do this we need to have the mind of Christ by becoming pure and blameless.

II. Good Examples of Partners in the Faith

Timothy and Epaphroditus are two examples in the Bible of partners in the faith who live out the principles lined out today. They both have Christ-like character.

(1) Example of Timothy

¹⁹ I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. ²⁰ I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. ²¹ For everyone looks out for his own interests, { 1 Cor 10:24 } not those of Jesus Christ.

²² But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³ I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I

see how things go with me. ²⁴ And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

(2) Example of Epaphroditus

²⁵ But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, {Philemon 2} who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.

²⁸ Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. ²⁹ Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, {1 Cor 16:18} ³⁰ because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me. {1 Cor 16:17}

Chapter Three

Session IV Celebrating: The Confidence of Christ's Race

I. Paul Found a Better Way

Application for Christian Living (3:1-4:9)

1. Avoid False Teachers – Be careful of your sphere of influence

(1) Paul's Experience Explained

¹ Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those **dogs**, those men who do evil, those **mutilators** of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are **the circumcision**, {Gal 6:15} we who **worship by the Spirit of God**, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who **put no confidence in the flesh** –

Live a Life for Christ

In the previous sessions, we learned about how our goal is to be like Christ – selfless character serving, “advancing” the Gospel message. We also heard from Paul that real value in life is “knowing” Christ. But if people don’t “know” Christ, they don’t understand how this can be a better way and sometimes feel like an outsider looking in. If the people of Rome understood all the richness of Paul’s life, they would have lined up to receive the good news of the Gospel and not follow false teachers. Paul knew that his former life never brought him into the reality of Christ. His past didn’t bring him to the place where he could be filled with the Holy Spirit and meet God. Of course at the time of his previous life, he didn’t understand this - until his encounter came face to face with Jesus Christ.

Warning About the Dogs – and I am not talking about my Maltese!

In verse 2, we see that Paul warns the believers to “watch out for the dogs.” During the day of Paul dogs were considered scavengers who fed off others for their own gain. They were aggressive at times and could devour if out of control. To the Jews, often the Gentiles (which were all other people) were described in this category.

“Do Evil” = means that they taught salvation by the works of the law and were prideful and show offs. They considered themselves as living blameless and pure lives. In reality, they provided stumbling blocks to the faith. Their character and motivation were evil and self serving. They were blind to what they were doing and justified their actions.

“Mutilator’s” = applied to the circumcision that the Jews took part in as a sign they belong to God. They were anointed to do God’s work. Circumcision was a sign as Baptism is a sign today along with a confession of faith. It is the act of being “set apart” for God. Paul said some of the teachers became circumcised, but it was simply a cutting (mutilating the skin) – it had no value – they had no genuine interest in the faith of Christ. Spiritual circumcision is more important than physical. God looks at the heart. Col 2:11

By society’s standards, Paul was an accomplished and powerful man to look up to even though he persecuted people. He was trained by some of the best, was promoted up the ranks and was very influential so people followed. Maybe his power was feared? Do we know people like this?

Righteousness Only Comes from God

⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, {2 Cor 11:22} of the tribe of Benjamin, {Rom 11:1} a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. ⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss {Matthew 13:44} for the sake of Christ.

Paul wrote, (verse 7) surpassing = Excellence = knowing Christ was better than the combined value of his former life.

⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the **surpassing greatness of knowing** {Eph 4:13} Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law**, but that which is **through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God** and is by faith.

Achieved Righteousness – when we believe that we can save ourselves by what we do and the laws that we make up. *Thinking that we are brought into God's will by our own choices, power and influence.*

Imputed Righteousness – when we trust in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit and the faith that is put in us by God's Spirit so that we know that we are being brought in line with God's will. *"Being brought into a 'right' relationship with God."*

II. How to Become Like Christ

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the **power of his resurrection** and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, {Rom 8:17} becoming like him in his death, {Rom 6:3-5}, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been **made perfect**, but I press on to take hold {1 Titus 6:12} of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. **But one thing I do:**

Forgetting what is behind {Luke 9:62} and **straining toward what is ahead**, ¹⁴ I press on {Heb 6:1} toward the **goal** to **win the prize for which God has called me heavenward** in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us who are mature {1Cor 2:6} should take such a view of things. {Gal 5:10} And if on some point you think differently, that too **God will make clear to you.** ¹⁶ **Only let us live up to what we have already attained.**

God is our Guide.

Goal = Marker

Heavenward = Our Marker.

When we reach Heaven, we will have reached our Goal and in the end be glorified and Perfect like Christ. But while on earth, Paul had great joy because as he dedicated his life to Christ each day, he became more and more like him. That meant that he began to know Christ even better.

- **Resurrection Power** – We die to our old selves at conversion (Romans 6:11) and experience the power of a spiritual resurrection. We are given new life. A new spiritual energy. We become like Christ over time, and in the end we will be a perfect reflection (1 Thes. 4:13-18).
- **Transformation Process** – Doesn't happen overnight or all at once, but over time we can link our mind and heart with Christ's and live like him. Just like when you live together as a family or have a close friend. The more you are with someone you become a lot alike. Especially in the way you think.

- **Active Commitment** – To become like Christ, we must make a full commitment to the call of Christ. We are to seek a complete relationship and “press on” for the prize. To “press on” (v12) in athletic imagery points to running a race because it is worth running.

(Verse 16) **Be disciplined in your walk and keep walking.** Remain steadfast.

Whatever is achieved up to this point was to guide them into the future as the standard. And as they kept learning and growing through the knowledge of Christ, God will make it clear to believers what it is that they should know.

Press on = means in the Greek to “run swiftly” in order to catch some person or thing. It was used in both hunting and athletics. One would run to gain victory.

A Pattern of Living for the Believer

1. Forget What is behind in the Past
2. Humble Yourself Listening to Christ
3. Strain Forward to what is Ahead as God Leads.
4. Don't Fall into the Pit of the Enemy of the Cross.
5. Join With Others who uphold the Authority of God's Word.

[17] **Join with others in following my example**, {1Peter 5:3} brothers [sisters] and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.

[18] For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, **many live as enemies of the cross** of Christ. [19] Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. {Rom 8:5, 6}

[20] **But our citizenship is in heaven.** {Col 3:1} And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, {1 Cor 1:7} [21] who, by the power {Eph 1:19} that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies {1 Cor 15:43-53} so that they will be like his glorious body.

Meaning Behind the Language of Citizenship

In Rome – the city of Philippi was a colony. They had Roman citizenship. They were proud of their Roman citizenship, but Philippi was considered an outpost colony, which meant that they had to wait for their instructions from the Roman authority as to how they conducted their lives. They were not free to live as they wished.

(Draw a dome under the authority.)

ROME

HEAVEN

PHILIPPI

THE CHURCH

Our heavenly authority is Christ who is our connection to God through the Holy Spirit. As believers of Jesus Christ, we are not free to do as we wish. We follow our authority for instructions through God's Word.

Chapter Four

Session V Celebrating: The Excellence of Christ's Peace

I. Key to Peace in Life (4:1-9)

(1) Steadfastness

¹ Therefore, **my brothers** [sisters], you whom I **love** [agape] and **long** for, {Phil 1:8} my joy and **crown**, that is how you should **stand firm** in the Lord, dear friends!

“Brothers and sisters in Christ”

“Long for”

“Joy and Crown”

“The Crown”

“Stand firm”

(2) Unity

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other {Phil 2:2} in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, loyal **yokefellow**, (or loyal Syzygus) help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the **book of life**.

“Yokefellow”

Names are in the book of life”

(3) Joy and Peace

⁴ **Rejoice in the Lord always**. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your **gentleness** be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do **not be anxious** about anything, {Matthew 6:25-34} but in everything, by **prayer** and petition, with **thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.

“Rejoice in the Lord Always”

“Gentleness”

“Integrity”

“Lose the Anxiety”

“Prayer” = prayerful people are peaceful people.

⁷ And the **peace of God**, {John 14:27; Col 3:15} which **transcends all understanding**, will **guard your hearts and your minds** in Christ Jesus.

“Peace of God” = Divine peace

“Transcends all understanding” = Excellent

“Guards your heart and minds” = Christ stands duty over your heart which drives your mind and motives. And this is how we have **THE MIND OF CHRIST!**

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is **true**, whatever is **noble**, whatever is **right**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **lovely**, whatever is **admirable** – if anything is **excellent** or **praiseworthy** – **think about such things**. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.

8 Qualities of the thought life.

1. True
2. Noble
3. Right
4. Pure
5. Lovely
6. Admirable
7. Excellent
8. Praiseworthy

What a testimony to the world when the God of peace {Rom 15:33} is with you! The above 8 qualities express the kind of living that results in the peace of God.

V. Expression of Thanks for the Philippians' Support (4:10-20)

1. Paul's Situation: Paul depended on God. His Joy was in the Lord, not material wealth or material things. He lived the secret to life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God taught him:

(1) Appreciation

¹⁰ I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it.

(2) Contentment

¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content { 1 Titus 6:6, 8 } whatever the circumstances.

(3) Adaptability

¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, { 1Cor 4:11 } whether living in plenty or in want.

(4) Dependency

¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

(5) Blessing

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

The Philippian church was like a beautiful fragrant offering to Paul and God's economy. This brought joy to Paul's heart. Paul reminds us all that everything good comes to us because of God's grace.

2. Paul's Attitude toward Those Who Gave

(1) Commendation

¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, **not one church shared with me** in the matter of giving and receiving, **except you** only; {2 Cor 11:8, 9} ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be **credited to your account**.

(2) Blessings

¹⁸ I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a **fragrant offering**, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And **my God will meet all your needs** {Psalm 23:1} according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father {Gal 1:4} be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Conclusion (4:21-23)

²¹ Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me {Gal 1:2} send greetings. ²² **All the saints** send you greetings, **especially those who belong to Caesar's household**. ²³ The **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Some manuscripts do not have Amen.)

The best part of Vs.22 is Paul's realization that once the palace guards spread the Gospel – Caesar himself would hear Christ's message too!

CHAPTER 5

OUTCOMES, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It was approximately five years ago when I started hearing and reading about what is called the American church crisis. I would go to Presbytery and hear about it; I would sit in seminary classes and hear about it; I would read articles about it; but no one seemed to know what to do.

As stated in chapter one of this thesis, an article from *Outreach* magazine for worship leaders brought forth the repeated concern that, “Sundays are quiet in today’s America. Banks and businesses are closed. Rush hour takes a rest. Most Americans have the day off. But the reason for the ‘holiday’ is no longer about anything HOLY, for a growing number of people don’t attend weekend worship services.”¹ The article reported that mainline churches are steadily declining and the organic church is on the rise, but as George Barna’s research institute points out, people are at least still seeking God. Yet what needs to be considered is that they are being driven to live different kinds of lives, and so they are looking for different kinds of experiences.

This is when I proposed a *24 Hours with God* retreat experience as one response to the problem. Keeping in mind research about spiritual behavior occurring outside church walls, it was my hope to create a venue that involved a concentrated learning experience off the church campus to stimulate the minds of the seeker, draw people close to God and

¹ Rebecca Barnes and Lindy Loury, “The American Church in Crisis,” *Outreach Magazine* (May/June 2006), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/outreach/articles/americanchurchcrises.html> (accessed April 27, 2012).

lead them eventually to attend church. To support this initiative, I provided a theological framework and discussed key concepts that would become the foundation for such retreats. I then looked at more contemporary applications in the literature for additional ideas. The project, as outlined in this thesis, developed over the years with two types of venues for a retreat format designed for spending 24 hours with God.

In this chapter, I will discuss the outcomes from this thesis-project. Three sections guide the evaluation: (1) What I learned. (2) How these outcomes will affect my ministry. (3) Things left for consideration. As discussed in detail in the Project Design chapter, the project included six *24 Hours with God* retreats. Each retreat is effective and unique in its own way and proves to be a vital way to insure biblical literacy as well as to help draw people closer to God. But what I also point out in this chapter is that the church needs to be open to creating even more unique opportunities for sharing the Word and God's love. Some ideas for these opportunities are being modeled for us by our younger generation and are discussed in relation to the retreats at the end of the chapter.

What I Learned

The purpose behind this thesis project was driven by the growing concern of biblical illiteracy of adults in America and the lack of awareness of God's presence in their daily lives. Even though we live in a very literate community there is a decreasing interest in studying the Bible which impacts a person's convictions and worldview for life. With the increasing demands placed on people's lives, I had hoped that a concentrated learning opportunity could possibly entice individuals to study the Scriptures and enhance their relationship with God. And to a large extent we can see,

through a survey given to the women in my church, that this was achieved by the women who took part in the retreats.

Because of the nature and desired atmosphere of the retreats, having a written survey at the end of each retreat did not seem appropriate. Feedback and suggestions were encouraged through the retreat committee, but a formal and measurable written survey was not distributed until after all six retreats had taken place. This survey involves fewer participants than I hoped, and since most are recent attendees, it does not include many comments from those who attended years ago. Yet to my encouragement the women who were able to take the survey are solid members of the women's Bible study, and the comments have enough variants to warrant consideration.

The survey consisted of several sections with the intent of measuring both the general retreat experience as well as the various aspects specifically. There is some repetition intentionally built into the survey in order to give a more reliable measure by offering different ways of responding. Enclosed in the Appendix is an example of the actual survey given to the women.

Response to Retreats in General

The first section of the survey listed all six retreats by title, location and theme. The women were asked to check which retreat they had attended so that I could understand and frame their answers better, but it also served as a helpful reminder for them as they reflected on the actual event and location. Thirty surveys were completed. Since some of the women attended more than one retreat over the years, the break down showed that women experienced both kinds of retreats. Nine women attended the

outreach Double Tree Hotel retreat; thirty-three women attended the outreach at Lago Mar Resort retreat and forty-four women attended the Duncan Center spiritual formation retreat.

In the second section of the survey I then proposed the question as to why they attended a retreat for the first time. This question helped me to see if their essential goals and expectations were met. By looking at the comments, I would say that most of the women's expectations were met.

The comments were:

- Wanted a time for personal reflection
- Had a desire to get to know and bond with the other women
- To increase my knowledge of the Bible to feel God's presence
- To get away from the stress of the everyday world
- Like the line by line study and so wanted to learn more behind the text
- To have time dedicated to spiritual renewal and growth
- To learn more about God and Jesus in a pleasant environment
- Have a desire to learn and want more Bible study and fellowship
- Go deeper with God and have a time for renewal
- To see what it was like.

From here, the women were asked in the third section to rank activities that were included in the agenda. The question was asked to see how meaningful the general eleven activities were for their retreat experience. I asked them to circle one number, ranking from most meaningful (1) to least meaningful (5). The total scores are in brackets for each:

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Ranking</u>				
Personal Reflection	1 [15]	2 [6]	3 [6]	4 [2]	5 [1]
Sessions with Lecture	1 [18]	2 [8]	3 [3]	4 [1]	5 [0]
Small Group Activity	1 [10]	2 [11]	3 [5]	4 [3]	5 [1]
Dinner in restaurants	1 [5]	2 [3]	3 [11]	4 [7]	5 [4]

Dinner in a dining hall	1 [5]	2 [9]	3 [9]	4 [5]	5 [2]
Free Time Socials	1 [3]	2 [5]	3 [18]	4 [2]	5 [2]
Crafts or Activity	1 [4]	2 [7]	3 [6]	4 [7]	5 [6]
Worship, Communion	1 [25]	2 [4]	3 [0]	4 [1]	5 [0]
Prayer Stations	1 [15]	2 [10]	3 [4]	4 [1]	5 [0]
Skits/Guest Speakers	1 [7]	2 [11]	3 [8]	4 [1]	5 [3]
Line/line Bible Study	1 [26]	2 [3]	3 [1]	4 [0]	5 [0]

At a glance we can see that the survey begins to show that the top three activities appear to be worship, Bible study in lecture format, and prayer. These areas will be expanded on in the comments of later sections.

The fourth section of the survey entitled, “Bible Study and Experience with God” had to do with how much the individual woman felt she had advanced in her spiritual walk. This included Bible study and experiencing God in her life. I suppose it should not have been a surprise to me, but overwhelmingly, most of the attendees who took this survey had regular Bible study practices in place, as well as some level of an awareness of God’s presence in their lives before going on a retreat.

This brings me to a question that I had to ask myself, are retreats an effective venue for outreach to seekers and non-believers? From the following survey results, I cannot say that they are. From the participants’ responses below as well as their comments we see later, it would seem that the good that has come from the retreats up to this point is that already established believers have grown deeper in their study and walk with God. The women’s responses are as follows:

The retreat experience has given me a **better understanding** of:

- **Why I need to study the Scriptures in the Holy Bible**

Strongly Agree [18] Agree [12] Disagree [0]

- **Who Jesus Christ is as my Lord and Savior**

Strongly Agree [18] Agree [12] Disagree [0]

- **How the Holy Spirit works in my life**

Strongly Agree [21] Agree [9] Disagree [0]

- **Spiritual Disciplines such as prayer, meditation and journaling**

Strongly Agree [16] Agree [14] Disagree [0]

- **My value and worth as the person God created me to be**

Strongly Agree [18] Agree [12] Disagree [0]

The next set of questions entitled, “Connecting Through Relationships” was the fifth section of the survey and was meant to assess the retreat experience as a means of forming and continuing the kind of relationships needed for ongoing spiritual growth and discipleship. Fellowship opportunities are a vital part of the process of creating and building healthy relationships which work like glue in any church. Also, for the purpose of discipleship, it was my hope that by the time the women left the retreat, some of the more confident attendees would begin to share their faith. Overwhelmingly, the women’s responses in this section showed that this was the case.

Response to Specific Areas

The survey then asked for “Additional Thoughts” in regard to the following areas:

I. Fellowship; II. Logistics and Materials; III. Bible Study and Spiritual Formation; and

IV. Worship. Examples were listed of the various activities involved in each category with directions encouraging individual comments about the value of these activities. Even though the open comments are not a quantifiable measure, they add insight to the structured response sections of the survey. Provided below is the list of aspects or activities grouped according to the four categories, followed by a general summary of the comments regarding each category.

Fellowship

Get acquainted activity
 Creative or hands-on activity
 Sharing meal in dining room or restaurant
 Social time, such as “tea”
 Bonding with roommate or others in free time

The comments² show that getting acquainted through such activities as the teas was a great way to calm down after coming from the busyness of the world. This is viewed as a good way to start a retreat and a great way to get to know one another. In the future there is a feeling that the teas could be less scripted so that women can talk about anything on their mind.

Another effective way for fellowship was when the women would have time to visit with their roommates. This usually took place at night, and a genuine fondness was developed. One woman commented, “The fellowship with Christian women overnight was amazing.”

² The following information is provided to the reader as raw data. The comments from retreat participants are shared as a response without commentary in this section in order for the reader to see the comments as received by the author and to evaluate the data according to the purpose of this thesis.

A few of the women enjoyed the craft time because it was helpful to converse with others while doing a project. Free time was also a bonding experience except for one woman who didn't know anyone and was shy. This person had the perception that people who knew each other stayed together too much. Ice breakers didn't help this person because she felt "embarrassed."

One of the ladies commented that crafts & activities were not the reason she went, adding, "I don't really need fellowship activities, but once engaged it certainly enhanced the experience. Too many activities though detract from fellowship."

Other comments were, "I enjoyed having the opportunity to leave with a 'secret sister' for it was a great way to carry the feeling of new friendships into the days following the retreat."

Another expressed that skits and eating homemade snacks helped "everyone to loosen up." "Even cutting magazines for a memory box to express who I am was a meaningful activity."

And one woman wrote, "As a new person in the church, the retreat experience helped me to accomplish the reason I went—to make new friends."

Logistics & Materials

Agenda listing schedule of activities
Workbook for sessions & reflection exercises
Open (free) time vs. planned activities
Room accommodations/ location/food

The comments indicate the general perception that the retreats are well planned and executed. "There is a good amount of free time and small group time which allows for us to become acquainted and grounded in our relationships."

It was suggested that two nights would be better for many reasons, but for one it would allow time to cover the large amount of material in the notebooks. An important insight for me in future planning is that the women do not need as many exercises and notes in the workbook. They want a more streamlined approach.

To my surprise, while some felt the resort atmosphere was desirable, most of the women felt the spiritual retreat center was the best for drawing close to God and for becoming in touch with their own thoughts and feelings. For this purpose, making some rooms available for singles is something we should try to accomplish for future retreats.

The food was not all that important, but the dining hall/cafeteria style of eating allowed for greater fellowship and warmth.

Bible Study/Spiritual Formation

“Line by line” Bible study
 Visuals, skits, props
 Question time in large group session
 Small group guided discussions
 Directed personal reflection/devotion time

The comments are consistent with the responses in the earlier section of the survey which show that the line-by-line Bible study is what women value most in the retreats. They enjoy knowing the text intimately and being able to read the Bible on their own with a new depth.

The devotional activity was a good way to start conversation, especially when in small groups. But what they find most inspiring and unique in these studies is what the Bible says and how to apply the principles to everyday life. Guest speakers and skits are appreciated as a break in the intensity of the line-by-line study. And directed personal reflections along with prayer time were important for adding balance.

Discussion time is the next favorite part of the retreat and when the group isn't too big, the women who attend leave feeling more enriched. A take-away for me in this area is that less is more and that personal application rather than intellectual head knowledge is what brings them back for more. One woman wrote, "I love it when Connie shares her personal stories!" But most importantly another woman wrote, "We all need to learn more of God's teachings."

Worship (Chapel) Service

Music, Hymns
 Message
 Communion
 Self-offering
 Receiving personal prayer

After reading through the entire survey and the additional comments, it is refreshing and exciting to know that Worship is still a meaningful and cherished experience. It was suggested that a personal testimony could be the main message for the worship service. I think that is a great idea.

When we began retreats a few years ago, worship was in the middle of the 24 hour agenda. Then it was moved to being the final activity before leaving for home. Having worship as the conclusion of the retreat works best for closure and a deep experience with God. Some of the comments were:

"I left feeling cleansed and refreshed."

"Being able to share the prayers at the prayer station has brought me closer to a lot of people."

“The music, communion and prayer stations were very personal and brought home the point that God is a personal God and is present in our lives.”

Other Noteworthy Comments

At the end of the survey, participants were encouraged to give general comments about their overall retreat experience. Following are some direct quotes that are especially meaningful.

“Most significant for me was coming to an understanding of my purpose and learning to listen to God for direction.”

“I feel that our women’s retreats have contributed to the growth of so many women in our church.”

“Retreats provided a way for me to be removed from ‘the world’ into a sanctuary for 24 hours while feeling the fellowship of women, God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.”

“I think the retreats are great down to the details. When we received the crosses it was so special and now years later I still see women wearing them. It is a reminder of the bond God has placed between us and that I have family here in Him.”

“When we are on retreats, it is an individual experience. Some people like the relaxation and meditation. Some enjoy the social interactions. But most of all we all share in the love a good teacher who believes in and shares Biblical truths.”

“In the past few months I have made the decision to seek God in a deeper way. God has led me to this church, your study and teachings.”

“I prefer to have a private room because the retreat is a time to be with God. I prefer a simple place without much distraction and with trees on the property. The

personal reflection and devotion time are the reasons for my attending a retreat. They allow me to assess where I stand with God and to make adjustments. In the busyness of my life, to set twenty-four hours aside, just dedicated to God is a treat with an infinite value that I want to cherish every minute.”

“A retreat to me is a time set aside and away from the everyday world to be alone with God and to take a look at life and see where I am going and where I should be going. Although I have enjoyed the social aspects, that does not have meaning to me in terms of the purpose of a retreat. God is part of my every day. The retreat has not changed that. The Bible reading, though, has helped me to see God as he showed Himself in other times and it has deepened my understanding of God’s will.”

How these Outcomes will Affect My Ministry

The outcome of this thesis project shows that there is definitely a place in God’s economy for twenty-four hour retreats, but this venue alone cannot be the ultimate answer for solving the decline of the American church. It may be part of the answer and is a response, but in a broader sense the survey data tells me that a retreat that is steeped in exegetical study and spiritual formation might lend itself more to the mature believer as they are ready to go deeper in their faith.

The *24 Hour with God* retreat assists women in their journey with God and one another, but is also an effective means to help Christ’s disciples to grow confidence in their faith so that they can become effective witnesses in the world. But from here I have to admit that it appears to me that the church must still concentrate its best efforts in daily and weekly studies. For example, I lead a weekly line-by-line Bible study that allows

time for questions and fellowship. This too is a powerful and intentional way to nurture disciples for Christ and is a training ground for engaging in the community described in chapter one as the organic church.

The *organic church* concept is something that has been evolving for many years.

T. Austin Sparks coined the word *organic* to refer to a group of people who share an identity in community through forms of shared expression. Note his words:

God's way and law of fullness is that of organic life. In the Divine order, life produces its own organism, whether it be vegetable, animal, human, or spiritual. This means that everything comes from the inside. Function, order, and fruit issue from this law of life within. It was solely on this principle that what we have in the New Testament came into being. Organized Christianity has entirely reversed this order.³

Of course Sparks is referring to the first communities formed in the 1st century, as a result of living out the Christian faith. Christ's followers had to find their identity and role in society by new beliefs set out by Jesus. It was a new worldview for them and had to be shaped by their daily living within the community. This authentic expression of the faith is on the rise again and is impacting the institutional church of today. Community groups are being formed into small, medium and large sanctuaries for finding answers to life and to God.

Retreats could possibly offer an alternative solution for a sanctuary, but most of what the organic church is looking for is a living community with shared identity on an ongoing basis. And so the American church is going to have to get to know this so called new culture and authentic witness of the faith by being intentional with alternative and meaningful ways to reach people with the Gospel message twenty-four hours a day,

³ Frank Viola, "Why the Organic Church is Not Exactly a Movement," *Beyond Evangelical*, (January 2010), <http://frankviola.org/2010/01/14/why-organic-church-is-not-exactly-a-movement-christianity-today>, (accessed April 27, 2012).

seven days a week. This means that through a shared identity, we are going to have to stretch outside of the church walls, as the Great Commission directs us through the Words of Jesus, to reach those who will not come to church or on a retreat, but are willing to listen to us when we are on their turf.

I want to be clear that I still believe that there is a place for the institutional church and eventually bringing people to church and on retreats for Bible study and time alone with God is vital. Let's face it, for many of us, Sunday worship along with all the things that make us who we are and enjoy are an authentic witness of our faith and is an important testimony to the world. But I also believe that it is the responsibility of the people sitting in the pews and the women who went on retreats, to be in dialogue with one another as to what it means for us to engage in new venues for worship and studying God's Word, as we share our faith.

In the passage from Luke 10:38-41, Jesus highlights for us that there is really only one necessary thing that we need to focus on as followers of Christ and that is sitting at his feet, learning, sharing, and embracing the love available from God through him. And I believe that we can do this through the classroom and on retreats, but it is vitally important that we find ways to go to the people as Jesus did and invest our lives with theirs.

Take a look at the Scripture text once again:

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

From this story we see that sharing our lives and our stories is life-changing. Both Mary and Martha loved Jesus. He was their friend, and he seized the opportunity to develop that relationship as he told them about life with God. He was also making disciples of Mary and Martha by living the Christian life in front of them. But also notice that our text shows us how Jesus nurtured their faith. Jesus went to Mary and Martha's home as he did with most people that he encountered. He met them where they were most comfortable. He went from town to town, the Bible says, to be with people and share the love of God and the message of hope. He met the woman at the well, he dined with Zacchaeus in his home, he went to the lake and sat in boats, he gathered on a hill to speak. Jesus did most of his teaching where the people were, and for the most part, he didn't ask them to come to him. This is what God's people of today are looking for too.

The key to keeping the Gospel message alive is for non-Christians to come to know Christians through meaningful relationships and shared activities. Friends reach friends. It is as simple as that and it is the way Jesus made disciples. He became involved in their lives and made the Gospel message relevant. He knew that they were thinking about their relationships, kids, jobs, friends, health, finances and hobbies, and so he engaged in conversation around such things and then he would move the dialogue to deeper issues concerning God. That is what he was doing with Mary.

People are looking for a place to belong and to find answers as to how to live in the pressure of a busy and stressful world while finding purpose for their lives. People want to be understood and because they are tired and are pulled in many directions like Martha in our story; they need to be drawn in by a person who knows the Lord so that

there can be a release of the transforming power that lies within each of us because of the Holy Spirit.

Things for Consideration

We are living in a time when only a solution that goes to the very roots of what it means to be Jesus' people will do. As Jesus' people, the church when true to its calling is still one of the most potent forces for transformational change, but the Holy Spirit needs to reengage the amazing power that lies within each one of us as we live our lives in front of others, sharing our genuine passion for Christ and his love.

One way that we can see God transitioning the way the church "does church" is to force the question: What have been the most effective ways to spread the Gospel message? Missiologist Alan Hirsch helps us to do this by reflecting on some factors involved in the beginning of Christianity.

Hirsch points out that:

- In the year 100 AD, the early Christians, were barely tolerated and often persecuted.
- When they met together, they didn't have any church buildings as we know them. They tended to be very small converted houses.
- They didn't have the scriptures, for they were putting together the Canon.
- They didn't have professional forms of leadership.
- They didn't have seeker-sensitive services, youth groups, worship bands, seminaries, commentaries etc.

- They actually make it hard to join the church. By the late second century, aspiring converts had to undergo a significant initiation period to prove they were worthy.

In fact they had none of the things that we would normally employ to solve the problems of the church, and yet they grew from 25,000 to 20 million in 200 years.⁴ What caused this growth? They shared their source of power which is back to the one and only necessary thing: Jesus.

If Barna's research is accurate, by 2025 (13 years) the local church as we know it now will lose roughly half of its current "market share" and alternative forms of faith experience and expression will pick up the slack.⁵

Alan Hirsch states that, "What is becoming increasingly clear is that if we are going to meaningfully reach this majority of people, we are not going to be able to do it by simply doing more of the same.... Simply pumping up the programs, improving the music and audiovisual effects, or jiggering the ministry mix won't solve our crisis."⁶

Today and in the future, the church will need to be expressed and created out of places and events where Christians and not-yet-Christians can interact meaningfully with each other. And retreats may be a vital way to do this, but most likely for our younger crowd we will need to adapt to what Hirsch's research reports. He writes, "Around the world Christians are developing cafes, nightclubs, art galleries, design studios, football teams, etc., to facilitate the proximity and interaction that is desired.... If the church

⁴ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 18-20.

⁵ Press release on Barna's book *Revolution*, from George Barna and Associates, at <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=201>.

⁶ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 37.

service is the only space where we can meaningfully interact with unbelievers, we are in trouble.⁷

One example of effective outside venues takes place in Birmingham, England, where Pip Piper, the founder of a design studio called *One Small Barking Dog*, runs a monthly gathering in a local café called a *Medicine Bar*. They consider it a spiritual space and zone where friends can hang out, experience the ambience and talk about faith, religion, and spirituality.⁸

This is only one example and to some it may appear extreme, but in reality, even here in America, there is a new “tribalism born in our new postmodern era.”⁹ This new group of people identify themselves less by grand ideologies, national identities, or political and denominational allegiances; for there are sub-cultures within the different cultures. But they still have the need for God.

Youth specialists describe this new group by sub-cultures, because they tell us that there are over fifty identities that young people claim. Such identities as computer nerds, skaters, homies, surfies, and punks are on the rise, and so we need to take their subcultural identity with utmost seriousness. Hence any missional response to them will have to be in their sub-culture within their culture. That is the most effective way that we as believers can engage with them.

In the past, the American church has approached evangelism and bringing people to the Lord through what can be called an “outreach/inreach” approach, but today and in the future, we are going to have to focus a lot more of our efforts in going out and staying

⁷ Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 24.

⁸ Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 24.

⁹ Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 24.

out to be with them. Jesus said to his disciples (Matthew 10) “I am sending you!” That is what the word *mission* means, “to send.” And where do we go? How? The new generation is defining that for us.

Recently I have been reading and studying more about what is called the Digital Generation. They are considered the new frontier. This generation (Z) has spent their entire lives with the World Wide Web and has available to them all the information that they need, where ever they are. What they believe they need for relationships or for filling their spiritual needs is right at their fingertips.

The Digital Generation has had the use of communications and media technologies such as instant messaging, text messaging, MP3 players, mobile phones, iPhones, iPads, and YouTube - just to name a few - for much of their lives. No longer are they limited to even the home computer, for the internet is now increasingly carried around in their pockets and purses.

Even the learning arena has to adjust its methods. At Indiana University there is a professor named Sasha who teaches by a new literary media because he understands that digital tools are changing the teaching experience. He states that students today need to be able to participate in the learning process so that they can express themselves.¹⁰

He doesn't lecture; rather to encourage learning about global issues, he uses the empowerment of play and the creation of animated stories as a way to develop the students' mind. There are no books or curriculum provided, for everything changes or becomes outdated too fast. This Generation Z is going to move through life discovering new territories at a speed that has never been traveled before as they seek answers for

¹⁰ Sara Bernard, “How to Teach with Technology,” *The Digital Generation Project:Edutopia*, (May 2009),The Digital Generation Project/Edutopia. www.edutopia.org/digital-generation-sasha-barab-video (accessed April 27, 2012).

living in the world around them and with God. Although this perspective may be extreme, it does illustrate one direction of learning that needs to be taken seriously.

And so in closing, I believe that all learning arenas are going to have to adjust and for the church this adjustment is going to have to happen rather quickly. This thesis-project, has attempted to suggest a response to the American church crisis by getting people away to spend time with God in his Word. With First Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale's congregational members as participants in the project, such traditional methods as Bible study, Systematic Theology and exegesis with some spiritual formation techniques were used through the venue of *24 Hour with God* women's retreats.

Taking into consideration all that has been discussed in the previous chapters along with the glimpse of the new cultures upon us presents what can be a daunting challenge for the American church, for to some extent the church of Jesus Christ never seems to be able to settle into an effective concrete answer. But then I wonder: are we as leaders in the church making it harder than it has to be? It seems to me, maybe so.

God has given us his mandate and a Person that we can follow, and that mandate is to live out the Great Commission in God's diverse collection of subcultures and communities in the world. The Great Commission of Christ's church is still the same: We are to be disciples, and as we go we are to make disciples, followers of Christ, by carrying his light and message into the world. There is only one way we can effectively do this; it is by following the way Jesus "made" disciples, that is through the power of the Holy Spirit working in each one of us.

In the introduction of John Piper's book, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, he states that we are all to live our lives through "God-glorifying obedience to Jesus.... And

when we do this, we learn the keys to the kingdom and fall in love with our ultimate authority for life and in the process bring glory to his holy Name.”¹¹

Whether we find it on a twenty-four hour retreat, or in the diversity of community, there is only one necessary thing that we need and can all share, and that is Jesus. We need to allow people to observe the gift found in the Scriptures through the actions of our daily life, and then they might choose to study the Bible for themselves by sitting at his feet through listening to his Word. Then, like the early church, we can all spread his love through the passion and the power we get from our Lord.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Amen.

¹¹ John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006): 17.

APPENDIX

WOMEN'S BIBLE STUDY RETREAT SURVEY

Name _____

Thank you for helping with the final chapter of my Thesis. Your answers will be held in confidence, but will be valuable when viewed as a whole to the results of my report. I appreciate you! Connie

Please check any of the 24 Hours with God retreats you have attended.

<u>Retreat Title</u>	<u>Retreat Location</u>	<u>Retreat Theme</u>
The Power Behind God's Presence	Double Tree Hotel	Attributes of God
Every Time I Feel the Spirit	Lago Mar Resort	Holy Spirit
Celebrate	Lago Mar Resort	Philippians Study
Discovering Angel's	Duncan Center	Angels
Be Still and Know that I Am God	Duncan Center	Spiritual Formation
Hear God's Voice More Clearly	Duncan Center	Spiritual Formation

Reason for attending a retreat for the first time: _____

Please rank how meaningful the activity below was for your retreat experience.

Circle **ONE** number from most meaningful (1) to least meaningful (5).

Time for Personal Reflection	1	2	3	4	5
Sessions with Lecture	1	2	3	4	5

6. The retreat experience has given me a **better understanding** of:

- **Why I need to study the Scriptures in the Holy Bible**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

- **Who Jesus Christ is as my Lord and Savior**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

- **How the Holy Spirit works in my life**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

- **Spiritual Disciplines** such as prayer, meditation and journaling

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

- **My value and worth as the person God created me to be**

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

CONNECTING THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

7. The retreat experience helped me to make new friends and build relationships with other women.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

8. Relationships formed from retreats have helped support and guide me in my spiritual growth and my personal relationship with God.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

9. Being on retreats has encouraged me to become more involved in Women's Ministry, other ministries in the church, or other faith based activities.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

10. The retreat experience has encouraged me to invite others to Bible study or to retreats.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

11. Growing closer to God from attending retreats has encouraged me to share my faith more freely with others.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

12. I now have a better understanding of how I can serve God through my life.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Please note any additional thoughts you may have in regard to the following areas:

I. Fellowship

Get acquainted activity

Creative or hands-on activity

Sharing meal in dining room or restaurant

Social time, such as "tea"

Bonding with roommate or others in free time

Comment:

II. Logistics & Materials

Agenda listing schedule of activities

Workbook for sessions & reflection exercises

Open (free) time vs. planned activities

Room accommodations/ location/food

Comment:

III. Bible Study/Spirituals Formation

"Line by line" Bible study

Visuals, skits, props

Question time in large group session

Small group guided discussions

Directed personal reflection/devotion time

Comment:

IV. Worship (Chapel) Service

Music, Hymns

Message

Communion
Self offering
Receiving personal prayer

Comment:

Any other general comments about your retreat experience would be welcomed and again, thank you so much for taking time to answer these questions!

Other comments:

This survey was for the purpose of Rev. Connie Ast Caldwell's Doctoral Thesis,
completed by 2012 for Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. **SOLI DEO GLORIA!**

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